

‘I’m Not Supposed to Say “I Love You”
Written by ChangelingEyes

Fandom: Original Work

Rating: General Audiences

Categories: Gen, F/F

Stats:

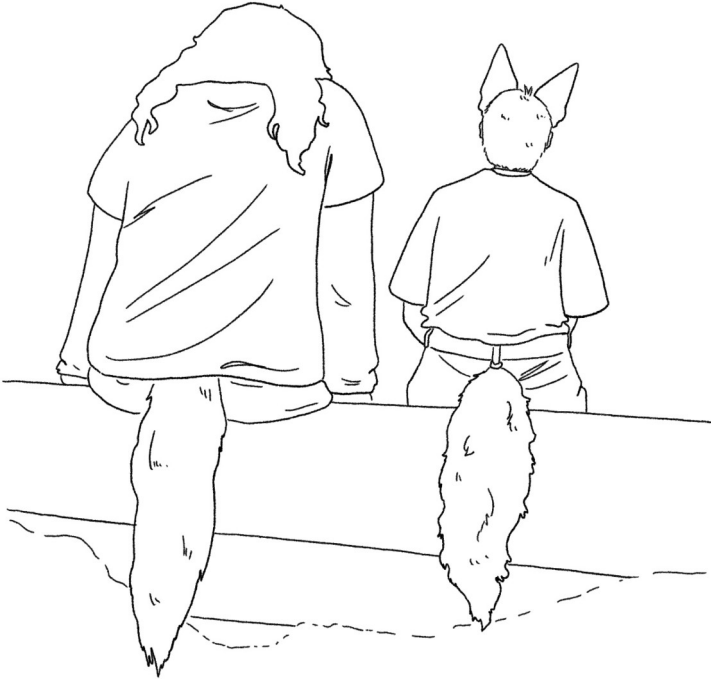
Words: 35,523 Works: 10 Complete: No

Originally posted on the personal website ChangelingEyes at
<https://changelingeyes.neocities.org/ocs/>

I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO SAY "I LOVE YOU"

first edition

*I'm NOT SUPPOSED TO
say "I LOVE YOU"*
ChangelingEyes



*"I feel a lot of things, but for this I feel the most."
-- "Like" by Patricia Taxxon*

Table of Contents

1. glance across the garden air.....	11
2. crying's easier in secret.....	24
3. sit in the car and I listen to static.....	39
4. it tears through my head, does it haunt you too?	48
5. and when we find out what's wrong with me, could you tell me how I'm right for you?.....	67
6. every day I take a minute of your time.....	81
7. it's the only ease that comforts me.....	93
8. and the words have fallen.....	100
9. lazy and lying on your belly.....	105
10. let's meet in the middle (and wait).....	119



1. glance across the garden air

The Changeling is wrist deep in damp fabric and diluted bleach when it hears the back door open behind it.

"I do not want help," it says firmly, and has no intention to waver on this resolution. It had planned this task specifically to begin the moment its mother had left for work so that it would not have to contend with her attempts to hover. A delay or change in her plans has no bearings on the Changeling whatsoever.

"Uhm, I wasn't actually going to offer," it hears in response, and this time it looks back over its shoulder to see that it is Augustus stepping out onto the porch, closing the door behind her. She looks up to meet its eye and her nose scrunches up; she reaches around the motion to adjust her glasses, sniffing.

The Changeling echoes the motion back at her — pushing its sunglasses up with its shoulder, since it is stuck wearing gloves to protect itself from the aforementioned bleach.

"Do you not have work?" it demands, but returns to its task of pouring diluted bleach over rolled up shirts without waiting for an answer. Of all the people Changeling knows, Augustus is the only person it feels no need to immediately turn away, as she is the only one who ever seems capable of successfully minding her own business. Changeling's mother worries too much about it to ever truly refrain from hovering, despite the fact that the Changeling has learned to be diligent

to follow the correct safety protocols just fine. On the other paw, its other friend Tiffany does not fret about potential danger so much as she simply has too many of her own ideas to view the Changeling's opinions and contributions as anything worthwhile. Two different dialogue trees leading to the same frustrating ending.

Augustus is typically the sole exception to this pattern. When the Changeling asserts that it is capable of doing something itself, Augustus always listens. It has not known her *quite* long enough to determine if this is because she is particularly literal-minded, or if there is something else at play. Changeling tries not to dwell on this ambiguity too long — it does not have the confidence to ask to learn the answer, so it does not bear getting its hopes up.

"No," Augustus is saying, giving the section of the porch Changeling is working in a wide berth as she walks past to reach the sun chair out on the lawn. She proceeds to sit cross-legged in the middle of it, rather than laying out flat as Changeling's mother does. "The schedule is different this week, because my boss wanted me to work on Sunday this week. And I cannot get more than forty hours... So, I got today off instead."

She settles her bag in the grass and digs out one of her many ragged sketchbooks. This, she lays open in the other half of the chair she had not deigned to sit on and proceeds to start looking for a pencil.

"I am too busy to talk," it warns her. Admittedly, it is not exactly 'busy' in a traditional sense — soon its only task will be to sit and wait for the bleach to settle into the fabric — but its head is too overfull of thoughts to find the space for speech. It does not anticipate this being a genuine problem, they have spent time in each other's company without exchanging a single word often enough, but it is good to be clear and specific when setting expectations.

"That's okay," Augustus replies, flipping through her book. "I don't really have much to say either. Your house is just seemed better to work at today."

Changeling huffs. "You always have too much to say," it grumbles without heat.

Augustus looks up from her sketchbook to smile across the yard at it, eyes blinking hard. The Changeling distracts itself from the way the tic and expression both push the skin around her eyes into soft little folds and creases by staring at the way the sun cuts a halo against the broad silhouette of her shoulders instead. Eventually, it glances away altogether — even with sunglasses on, it is too bright to withstand gazing directly at her for long.

"Now who's got a lot to say?" Augustus asks, poking her tongue out from between her teeth, and Changeling turns to busy itself with the bleach again, scowling.

There are three shirts that it had prepared to work on today, two of which have already been folded, tied, and soaked in bleach. By and large, the Changeling prefers the random, splotchy designs that emerge from scrunching the fabric at random and tying it in a tight, clumsy ball. It is universal in its variety — simple enough to use on graphic t-shirts without detracting from their preexisting designs, but solid enough to stand on its own on blank shirts as well. This method of preparation is also, conveniently, the easiest, requiring little forethought or manual dexterity.

For the third shirt, however, the Changeling has something else planned — a more complex design, requiring more attention to detail. An endeavor it does not undertake often, due in no small part to the over-ambition it had suffered from when it first began tie-dyeing shirts in its early twenties. The majority of these early, overzealous attempts had culminated in failure, and it had been forced to make

several compromises in its goals after the time it had knocked over an entire bottle of bleach in its frustration.

(It *had* successfully hosed itself off before it had the chance to suffer any burns, but its mother had been too upset by the sheer damage potential to be swayed in her convictions. "*What if you'd had a seizure?*", she had demanded, as if it does not get auras as warning, as if its epilepsy has not improved significantly in the past decade. Perhaps it is understandable, but more than that it is Frustrating.)

Now, it experiments almost exclusively with scrunching, save for the rare occasions it decides to attempt something loftier. The last time it had been *almost* good enough — the folds only slightly off-base, only a *little* too loose. The general idea had come through successfully, but the finer details had been lost to blotting and bleeding.

This time, Changeling has spent the past week practicing the necessary folds on a different, unrelated shirt in anticipation of today's attempt. The idea being to get itself accustomed to the specifics without feeling the amplified pressure of the next step in the process looming metaphorically over its shoulder — training at low stakes. It hopes that these efforts will pay off today.

It hesitates before it can begin, casting a wary glance over to where Augustus is still sitting in the sun, drawing. It does not mind if she is in the *yard*, but it does not want her to watch as it finally attempts this endeavor for real. Augustus does not make a habit of *interfering*, but does often habitually stare. If she is staring, it will have to ask her to wait inside until it is finished. Most days, Changeling does not mind this quality of hers, but today is different — the pressure of being observed will be too great to withstand, and it will make concentrating on its task more difficult, which is a variable the Changeling would rather avoid entirely.

Yet thankfully, Augustus is not looking. She is not even facing its work station at all, and is instead oriented out towards the back fence. Her legs are criss-crossed in front of her, and she has leaned her upper body over them to prop herself up with an elbow on the chair next to her sketchbook, chin in hand. It looks like the kind of sitting position Changeling's mother would claim to seem 'painful', but Changeling thinks it must give her a good view of her page while simultaneously keeping her back straight enough to avoid straining her trapezius. The sun catches off the arm of her glasses as she scrunches her nose in a particularly hard blink, lifting her pen from her page to bite along the side of it, swaying from side to side as she considers something.

Augustus thrives with these constant, slight, eye-catching movements. Not unlike the little tree in the back corner of the yard the Changeling often watches through its bedroom window: leaves rustling, branches swaying in the wind, teeming with little birds. Even the way the sun scatters and reflects through the leaves, Changeling thinks, is comparable to the way it looks shining through the messy snarls of hair that have pulled free from Augustus' low ponytail. A solid metaphor, it nods to itself, and permits itself another ten seconds to watch before turning to go back to its own work.

Changeling spreads the final shirt out flat over the porch and considers where to begin. *It will be fine*, it reassures itself. It has been practicing for this. Although, it must admit that it has been frustratingly difficult to measure its success during this training without being able to see how the folds would respond to the application of bleach. This has been a metaphorical thorn in its paw all week. Such is the nature of practice, it supposes. Things should go well. They *should*.

Instead of leaning forward to begin folding, Changeling finds itself reaching back to thread the length of its tail through its fingers repetitively. It is hesitating, which means

that it must be anxious. Changeling smooths fur under its fingers, takes several deep breaths, and tries to determine why.

It is wary of becoming overwhelmed, it decides eventually. Changeling does not always maintain a good sense of body control when it becomes frustrated — it lashes out. *If* it were to spill bleach on itself again, its mother would undoubtedly find out about this incident and become upset, and once again require it to be supervised for all future projects. Changeling loathes the idea of this entirely.

(Its mother is not *home*, of course, but Changeling is not exactly skilled in deception. Augustus' presence only further complicates things. Certainly she would be *willing* to attempt to cover for it, but by all accounts she is a *terrible* liar, so this effort would likely be only the final nail in the Changeling's metaphorical coffin.)

Since it does not want this, it must try to be proactive.



It will try its best with the folds, Changeling decides, but it will only try three times. This feels like a good number; safe.

If it cannot correctly fold and tie the shirt after three tries, then it will instead roll up the shirt and set it aside for another day, after Changeling has acquired more training to perfect the process. Two shirts are already in the process of bleaching, so it has fulfilled its goal for the day well enough already. It would be better to reserve the third shirt for a later time than it would be to risk undoing this sense of accomplishment and potentially cause itself trouble. *This is a good plan*, it thinks, nodding to itself, and then tucks its tail back out of the way, leans in, and gets to folding.

The plan was good, but ultimately unnecessary. The Changeling gets the shirt correctly prepared on its second try.

Satisfaction sets the Changeling's body to wiggling — a flash mental image of a dog stooped low in a play bow, tail wagging exuberantly. It shakes all of the giddy buzzing feeling out of its chest and arms like water from a pelt, and then re-centers, placing the folded shirt in a separate container and dousing it with the remainder of its diluted bleach. It flips the other two shirts over to check the fabric — the lightening color is just barely beginning to show. Changeling strips its gloves off carefully and disposes of them, rubbing the lingering texture of the latex off on its shorts as it paces a quick circle around the perimeter of the porch.

Waiting for the bleach to remove color is a part of the process, so the Changeling will be patient. It is also frustrated, since it cannot progress to doing anything different to pass this time, lest it get distracted enough to forget the shirts until the bleach has destroyed the fabric. This makes the time a struggle to pass.

It approaches Augustus where she still sits folded up in the sun, working on her comic. Right now, specifically, a shaky drawing of Shadow the Hedgehog.

"May I watch you draw?" it asks her, hovering awkwardly at the back of the chair. That would be basically the same as

waiting, only it would be waiting with company, which would ease the passing of time.

Augustus straightens up to look back at it, her spine popping several times with the stretch. "Yeah, alright," she says, head twitching to the side. "Just don't loom over my shoulder, please."

So, Changeling folds itself down onto its knees beside the chair, and then almost immediately recoils back into a squat. The grass tickles uncomfortably against its bare skin, making its stomach squirm.

"Here," Augustus says before Changeling can determine an alternate course of action. She shrugs out of her flannel shirt and offers it to the Changeling, wiping sweat off her forehead with the side of her arm.

The Changeling accepts the offering. "Is it too hot?" it questions cautiously, hesitating. Heat stroke can be dangerous, if left untreated. It remembers once, from before it could speak to ask for help for things. It can be bad.

"No," Augustus says plainly, nose scrunching up. "I like sitting in the sun, especially when the wind is going like this. It's nice." Changeling accepts this, folding up the shirt carefully and laying it out to kneel on; it is much better. "I kinda wish I could do it more often."

"Can you not?" Changeling asks, curious despite itself.

She shrugs. "I'm stuck at work most days, so I don't get to go outside much. There's some benches outside the strip mall I eat my lunch at though, when it's not raining. So I guess I do get some time. Oh well."

Augustus returns to her paneling. The Changeling cannot think of what to say, so it says nothing.

Do not forget the shirts, it reminds itself, but knows it does not have to check on them yet. Changeling lowers itself a little further, to rest its chin on the edge of the chair like it has seen dogs in videos do. It is a little uncomfortable — its spine is

not connected to its skull at the right angle to make the position as easy as it would be for a dog — but it is pleasant enough. An ideal angle to watch Augustus' hands as she works while limiting the amount of visible detail on the page she is working on, which is itself ideal for avoiding both plot spoilers and getting so engrossed it forgets about its original task.

What does prove to be more distracting is the array of other sensory experiences it is subject to. The heat of the sun bearing down on its back, the wind rustling through its hair, the subtle motion of the chair under its chin swaying with Augustus' movements. Since it is not using its hands, Changeling folds its elbows between its thighs and belly, tucking its hands under its shins, and that is also nice. There are no walls to trap it in the noisy echo of electronic humming, and it is instead surrounded by the wind carrying the sound of birdsong, pen on paper, and distant cars — something abstract in the quality that Changeling cannot define. Empty, perhaps? Regardless, it thinks, Augustus was right: it is nice to sit in the sun.

Truthfully, Changeling does not spend much time outside. When it does, it rarely ventures out past the porch, given that the yard is encircled with other houses that trap it under the oppressive weight of eyes peering at it through windows and over fences. Like a bug pinned in place by needles and pins: unpleasant. It feels different with Augustus, though — diffused between the two of them, less overwhelming. It would be nice to do this more often, with her.

"Don't you have to check on your shirts?" she asks after a while.

Wrinkling its nose, Changeling grunts, a little annoyed to break the quiet. She is not wrong, however — it does still have tasks to complete.

Since it does not feel like getting up, it does not bother. It lifts itself up onto all fours instead, balanced neatly on its toes and knuckles, fingers tucked in against its palm. Easier to trot over to the porch like that, and spare itself the troublesome sensation of pulling its body fully upright and bipedal. More comfortable by far; at least until it remembers that it is not alone.

Behind it, Augustus makes a noise so soft it is almost carried away by the wind, but Changeling hears it. The reminder feels like a metaphorical bucket of ice water thrown painfully over its head. Changeling freezes, lungs catching, its stomach clenching in a way that makes all of its limbs go cold and stiff. It had not been thinking ahead; it is not meant to do this where other people could see.

Changeling had been distracted by the feeling of the sun on its back and the wind in its fur, but it should not have let its guard down so thoroughly. People laugh at this, it recalls too late to prevent it from happening. There had been other feral children when Changeling was in its puppyhood, in elementary school, but they had grown up to find it something weird and intolerable. The Changeling had not understood the shift in perspective, but it had grown used to the mocking soon enough. Even its mother asks it not to, finds it to be unnerving. Changeling does not often take pains to avoid the inevitability that is being mocked, but in this, it was meant to know better.

The noise Augustus had made was not a laugh, however. It was not the startled yelp Changeling's mother makes when it does not realize she is home either. It was almost more of a "Woah," it thinks, but it feels it *must* have misheard. Feeling all-too-much like it is caught in the crosshairs of a hunter's scope, Changeling glances back at her over its shoulder.

Augustus is indeed staring, but still she is not laughing. "You're *really* good at that," she says, head twisting to the side.

"I did not know people could move so much like dogs like that."

Changeling does not know what to make of the quality of her voice. What it *does* recognize is that her hands are stiff, fingers fluttering. Augustus does this when she is excited, Changeling thinks, poleaxed. It has seen her do so when she gets to talk about a good day, or that time she had told Changeling that there are Sonic games for the PlayStation, and it had said that it *might* one day be willing to try one out.

"I," the Changeling stammers, feeling off-kilter. In hindsight, perhaps, it follows that Augustus never would have laughed out of cruelty, but neither does Changeling's mother, and still their reactions are not comparable in the slightest. Changeling lacks an appropriate response to something on *this* level. It does not know how it is meant to act at this juncture. "I must wash the bleach out of the shirts before they are damaged," it manages, staring fixedly at Augustus' shoulder and reaching for the first impulse its brain offers to it. "But, after, I could, show you."

The words are very stilted in its mouth. It does not know the appropriate response to this situation; it does not know if this impulse was a good one. Despite itself, a part of Changeling is still braced for Augustus to recoil. A delayed reaction would very nearly make more sense than her current one — much more in line with the historical data the Changeling has been exposed to. Even its mother does not embrace this manner of self-expression.

Instead, Augustus goes on to shut her sketchbook so swiftly she nearly knocks it off the chair entirely. "Really?" she asks, voice much louder. The stiffness bleeds further up her arms; her head jerks to the side.

"Yes," Changeling answers, a little stronger this time, and Augustus squeaks high up in her throat. *This is a good sound*, it thinks tentatively; easily recognized from the times they have

spent watching shows together. "After I rinse the shirts," it reaffirms.

At this, Augustus squeals — sharp and pitched. Changeling winces a little from the sudden sound, but the emotion inside of it catches pleasantly inside of its rib-cage despite the shock. "*Oh*, this is exciting," Augustus confesses, rising up on her knees, fists clenched and shaking. She bares all of her teeth in a smile, and adds, "I really want to play wolves with you."

That is a *tremendously* uncool way to phrase it, the Changeling cannot help but think, feeling its face wince at the statement, but neither can it seem to muster up genuine offense at it. Instead, it finds itself swaying minutely from side to side. Words feel beyond it again; it swallows the impulse to bark and nods once instead, solid and sharp, and hurries to bring the plastic containers inside to the kitchen sink before it can become too overwhelmed.

Already it is wiggling too much to be delicate as it dumps the shirts out into the sink to rinse them with water. Briefly, it forgets to put new gloves on in its haste to finish this task to move on to its new one, but thankfully remembers before it can get too far. It washes its hands to be safe before pulling a pair of gloves out from under the sink and putting them on clumsily. It spares a moment to be grateful that Augustus is waiting outside and could not witness the slip up.

One at a time, it scolds itself firmly. It is a little too overfull of something hot and buzzing and eager to take it to heart.

The pattern on the third shirt came out *perfectly*.



2. crying's easier in secret

Out of the corner of its eyes, the Changeling sees Augustus startle as the first peal of thunder rumbles out overhead.

"Shit," she says, stumbling to her feet in the same blink of time it takes for Changeling to turn to face her fully. "I've got to go," she adds abruptly as she peeks around the edge of the blinds to see outside, where Changeling is beginning to hear the faint patter of rain against the glass. "Bye, Changeling!"

By the time Changeling has caught up to what has happened, Augustus is already gone.

It feels its face twist up into an expression, and crosses its arms tightly over its chest, feeling off-balance and annoyed by the sudden deviation from their usual routine. That is not the way things typically go. Augustus should have stayed to at least finish the page she was working on, should have lingered as she prepared to leave at her usual time, and should have allowed Changeling to walk her to the front door and bid her a proper goodbye. That is the way they have been doing things for weeks and weeks. That was how it *should* have gone.

The Changeling crosses its arms more firmly, hinging forward at the waist to pin them between its thighs and chest where it has been kneeling on the floor. This deviation is understandable, it corrects its irritation firmly. Augustus does

not prefer to drive in the rain, it knows this — she will often even reject invitations outright if it even appears as though it might begin to storm. Tonight is a deviation only because she likely had not anticipated the turn in weather, and thus had elected to leave quickly before the storm had the opportunity to worsen. Her instinct was not incorrect — already, the Changeling can hear the downpour of it, noisy against its windowpane. The abrupt deviation was logical; it does not serve a purpose to be annoyed by this.

That does not leave it inclined to uncurl itself with any urgency. It registers that it is pouting, and thinks that is lame, so it decides it is plotting instead. It is impossible to prevent unexpected interruptions as a general rule, but if Changeling checks the weather prior to Augustus' visits, then it will be able to anticipate the possibility of rain even if Augustus forgets. That will reduce the likelihood of a repeated incident in the future.

"Okay," the Changeling says to itself, and flops to its side to attempt to find its phone so that it can set an alarm for itself. 4:30PM, weekdays: Check weather for rain. That way it will know what to expect before Augustus' new store even begins closing, so it will have ample time to anticipate a course of action. "Okay," it repeats, discarding the phone in favor of indulging in twisting its body haphazardly against the floor, feeling the fibers of the carpet catch and pull against its clothes and skin and scrubbing away the lingering irritation, though it halts when the movement jostles its ears uncomfortably by the band.

It rolls back onto all fours and allows the evening to come to an adequate close by ensuring its game is saved and the controller is put properly away. It attempts to not feel the off-kilter silence around where Augustus' typical background chatter should be by humming noisily in the back of its throat.

Quickly resigns itself to the reality that the two noises are not comparable in the least, and ceases.

"Oh, there you are," its mother comments when it finally emerges from its room, but there is an odd hesitation to her that the Changeling does not know how to interpret. Like an uncertain twist of the ears, a cautious sort of yawn in the air. It makes a vague attempt to decipher the shape of her face, and fails.

Changeling steps further into the room, wary, twisting its hips deliberately to feel the brush of its tail against its calf. The television is turned on, but the volume has been muted. "I swear I can hear something strange," its mother says, under the cacophony of thunder shuddering through the air, almost rattling the windows with its noise.

"Thunder," Changeling offers, and is ignored. It watches as she rises to begin approaching and peering out of the nearby windows, searching for the source of her strange noise. The Changeling's own hearing is keener than hers, but between the rain, the electronic buzz of the nearby kitchen appliances, the passing hum of a car engine, and the repeated interruptions of thunder and lightning, it cannot focus well enough to decipher anything in particular.

Its mother has reached a window over by the front door. "Oh, hell," she says abruptly, startling it. She does not swear often, or at all.

"Why," it asks, voice almost a bark as the combination of a particularly bright flash of lightning and its mother's abruptly urgent donning of a rain coat sets its teeth on edge. The impulse to retreat entirely and put on its ear defenders rises up in its chest and is dismissed.

"Do not come outside," mom says firmly instead, and then goes out of the front door and into the torrential rain.

"Why," Changeling demands, louder, but knows it will not receive a response. It hesitates a moment, and then shifts

closer to the door in order to follow the angle of its mother's trajectory from indoors. Augustus' car is still parked in the driveway, it notices immediately. The car engine was not passing at all, but idling, and when Changeling's mother opens the door to lean inside, a noise in the cacophony sharpens enough to be distinguishable to Changeling's hearing: Augustus is crying.

When a bolt of lightning illuminates the shape of her through the rain — a split second recognition of her hands pressed harshly over her ears — the Changeling can hear her shriek.

It can feel the phantom press of its ears flattened against the top of its head, tail tucked, and bares its teeth anxiously. It twists its fingers into a tangled knot and yanks, watching as its mother turns off the headlights and retrieves the keys, hauling Augustus out of the car and into the downpour with an unwavering grip on one of her arms. Changeling chews harshly against its knuckles as its brain begins to catch up with itself, and then haphazardly scampers off to find as many towels as it can.

Augustus is being forced through the front door as it returns — its mother doggedly pulling her along the last few steps into the entryway despite the resistance of Augustus' shaking legs and flinching and fighting to keep her ears covered and her eyes shut against the incessant noise of the thunder overhead. Changeling's mom is strong for her size, however; strong enough to catch the Changeling around the waist and completely halt its body's impulse to elope on the sporadic occasions it must leave the house with her. She does not relent until the front door is shut behind them, and only then allows Augustus to yank free and collapse into a frightened hunch on the floor.

Something cold and alarmed sinks uncomfortably down into the Changeling's stomach. It recognizes Augustus only

abstractly — in the length of her hair, and the cut of her shirt, the skewed shape of her glasses — but distress has made the familiar planes of her face strange and alien. She cries loudly: long, drawn out wails and big heaving sobs, enough to make Changeling's chest hurt. It flinches forward when her frantic efforts to shove back the way strands of her hair cling soddenly to her face knock her glasses off and onto the floor, and then grits its teeth and steels itself more deliberately.

It does not touch her, but leans in to drape one of its towels over her head. As she reaches to dry her face haphazardly against it, pulling it down over the back of her head and bunching the fabric up over her ears, Changeling ducks around to retrieve her glasses before they can risk being broken. It leaves the rest of its towels near by her side, but keeps a small washcloth so that it can dry the lenses before the droplets can leave streaking marks behind on the glass.

Mom grabs the edge of its sleeve to catch its attention, and Changeling ducks back out of reach, annoyed. It turns the glasses over to ensure there are no cracks in the glass or bending in the frame, and then freezes as it tries to determine what to do with them afterwards. Its mom pulls lightly on its sleeve again, and Changeling sets them carefully on the small entryway table before acquiescing to her retreat towards the living room.

"Augustus lives with her parents, doesn't she?"

The noise of Augustus' crying is an unhappy distraction. Changeling does not want to focus on whatever this exchange is. There is something electric coiling taut under its skin. The noise of the rain is incessant, the thunder increasing in frequency, and Changeling is annoyed by it and the knowledge that Augustus is afraid of it. It rocks backwards on its heels and twists its arms up tight over the back of its neck. The noise of its mother repeating the question is an additionally obnoxious grate on its senses.

"Her dad," it bites out finally, skipping back a step out of reach when its mother attempts to get its attention by reaching out. "Not her mom," her mom lives somewhere else, but the Changeling cannot remember where.

"Okay," mom replies, raising the phone in her hand demonstrably. It's Augustus', Changeling recognizes. "I'm going to call her dad to let him know what happened, and see if he can come pick her up."

"No," Changeling says automatically, but cannot pull the complete thought together in its head yet. Its gaze pulls to the side again — Augustus' crying is getting quieter, but the rain is not. There are too many things crowding up the air for Changeling to sort through correctly.

"No?" its mother repeats, dragging its attention unhappily back to their dialogue. "Why no?"

Changeling rocks forward, bending with the movement a little, and groans deep inside of its throat until the noise shifts up into a snarl in its sinuses. There are too many things; it cannot pull the complete thought together in the right way. "New-, she-," it chokes, and stomps its hindpaw in frustration. "She has a new job. She leaves after her dad does. She will not have her car. She eats lunch in her car," it spits finally, rapidfire, gritting the words out as quickly as it can. "New-, too many new problems. He leaves before her in the morning. She will not be able to go to work. She will be upset. She should stay here."

It shifts restlessly on its feet. Its sinuses are beginning to ache. There are too many things being held in its head at once. It had changed its mind to deviation in routine and the tracks are difficult to pull back now that the situation has changed a second time. Sometimes Changeling kicks things when it has meltdowns — what if Augustus accidentally kicks the table and knocks down her glasses? It regrets not keeping them close by.

It cannot go anywhere until its mother decides whether she will listen to it or ignore its advice.

If Augustus has to leave her car here, it will likely make the meltdown worse. The rain is already one thing too many.

"I will let her dad know that's an option," mom settles on. Changeling swallows back the impulse to snarl.

"Augustus' dad believes we are *both* boys," it makes itself say instead, remembering what is most important. Augustus has not said *why* this is important, but she never lies about anything, so Changeling knows it is vital. "He does not know Augustus is a girl," it emphasizes. "You *cannot* tell him."

It attempts to make its voice as serious as possible when it says this. It is important. More important than the car or her work schedule.

For a moment, its mother only stares, making a face the Changeling is unable to identify in any useful capacity, and then she nods. "Alright," she says. "I understand; I won't tell him."

The Changeling nods, abruptly bereft of words to continue. It has said everything it can think to address anyway. Whether its mother will listen to its first insistence is as of yet to be determined, but Changeling lacks both the skill and capacity to press or argue any further. Instead, it takes the break in conversation as tacit permission to hurry back to the entryway, collecting Augustus' glasses from the table and holding them carefully in its paws as it sits against the wall. It ensures it is close enough to be noticed, but not enough to broach Augustus' personal space.

It is difficult for the Changeling to ascertain, but it seems as though some of Augustus' distress has reduced. She is no longer crying as loudly, although Changeling can still hear her sniffing under the towel, and she has stilled aside from the rhythmic rub of her face against the towel's terrycloth. She

has discarded the original, sodden one in favor of a new towel from the pile it had left for her. That is all very good, it thinks.

Changeling does not speak, but begins to consider all of their options in its head. If Augustus' father listens to reason and allows her to spend the night, then the living room will be the best place for them to retire. Its own room is better in most regards, but it does not have a place for Augustus to sleep, there — not unless they share the bed, which Changeling has never done before. The couches are better in this circumstance, despite the rest of it.

So, they will move to the living room, and Changeling can close the curtains to block out most of the lightning, and if the TV is not enough to distract from the noise of the thunder, then Augustus can borrow its ear defenders as a buff. Regarding what to watch, since Augustus is dealing with a significantly larger disruption in routine, the Changeling will allow her to choose the show they watch. Although they have watched some Yu-Gi-Oh! and Bakugan together in the past, Augustus has spoken often of different Sonic shows she has wanted to show it, so perhaps that would be a safe suggestion.

So, then, once Augustus has calmed down enough, they will move to the living room couch, and Changeling will close the curtains, and turn on the TV, and retrieve its ear defenders just in case.

"Augustus," its mom's voice says, disrupting the flow of its thoughts.

Changeling tenses in uncomfortable anticipation. "I called your dad to let him know what happened. Spencer said it might be better if you slept here so that you wouldn't have to worry about your car tomorrow, and your dad agreed that was okay. He also said that if you change your mind, you just have to text him, and he'll come get you tonight, and you can figure out your work schedule tomorrow instead. It's up to you. I'm going to give your phone to Spencer, alright?"

She gives Augustus a wide berth as she moves to hand Changeling the phone, so Changeling swallows back the warning bark that had been building in its chest. "I know you have some clothes that should fit her," its mom tells it directly as it is putting the phone in its cargo pocket so that it can continue safely holding her glasses. "But if you have trouble finding something specific, let me know."

That is an important addendum to its plan, it allows. New step one: they will go to its room so that Augustus can change out of her wet clothes, and then the rest of it can file in afterwards. It nods obligingly for its mother's sake, and wishes she would go away. The planning is helping, but there is an odd buzzing ache behind its back teeth and it is feeling abruptly annoyed by it all. It does not want any additional barriers between itself and its plan that is waiting to be executed. Just as she is finally walking back to her own room, however, the buzz reaches around the Changeling's sinuses and settles firmly in front of its eyes.

Oh, it thinks unhappily, and hurriedly hooks the arm of Augustus' glasses onto the collar of its shirt, just in case its hands tense or jerk unexpectedly. Changeling's muscles lock up around it before it can bring its arm back down into its lap. Bad timing. Nausea slams into it like a metaphorical wall, and it feels its eyes blink compulsively against the swell of it. The buzz coalesces into a wave, spreading out from its eyes and crawling all over its face and body. It wants to wipe the sensation away but cannot. It wants to lay down but cannot do that either. It wants to snarl in anger, but the emotion does not come together correctly underneath the suffocating malaise.

"Damn," Augustus says eventually, voice rough and muffled. Changeling becomes aware of the slackened corner of its mouth when it feels saliva begin to gather there, but its

irritation is hindered by the incessant buzz and unsettled confusion. "*Damn*. That was-, was *really* embarrassing."

Distantly, the Changeling is annoyed it cannot tell her she has no reason to feel ashamed. Mostly it is preoccupied with the increasing flush of its skin. Its face is hot; its face is *hot*, and it is annoying. The tingling sensation crawling all over the Changeling's face reaches an unbearable peak, and then snaps. It breathes in sharply, pulling the saliva back in over its tongue. It moves its body deliberately, testing the push and pull of its muscles. It had worn a watch in high school, but had stopped at some point. Likely, the event lasted a minute, perhaps less, which is acceptable.

"Why," it says, which it did not mean to. The Changeling shakes itself off, cautious of rattling its head around too badly. "No," it interrupts before Augustus has a chance to respond. "You should not feel embarrassed."

"I really was going to leave," Augustus mumbles, looking doggedly down at the ground even as her neck tics pull her head upwards and to the side. The Changeling wonders if she is feeling as fatigued as it abruptly does. "I'm not, I don't get so scared when I'm inside of places, but in the car, it's — you can't see, and it gets *loud*. And if you drive into a puddle, like if it's deep-, a deep puddle, if you drive into it wrong then the engine could break. Or, even if you do it all, all right, then someone *else* might still hit you with *their* car cause they can't see." She sniffs, blinking hard. "I was go-, I was going to reverse. But then it, the rain started to pour, and it was very loud, and I couldn't see."

The Changeling has never sat in the driver's seat of a car in its whole life; it does not really envy Augustus this particular freedom.

"Embarrassing," Augustus reiterates to herself, the R's in her voice softened down to W's more intensely than

Changeling has heard in a while. "I'm-, I'm almost thirty and I'm still-, still scared of thunderstorms."

"You are barely 29," the Changeling argues, clipped, although perhaps it should be attempting more reassurance instead of this. It has never been particularly good at comforting others, however; it is mostly just good at arguing. Its face twitches in annoyance, but it does not walk the words back or attempt to scrounge up ones that would be theoretically 'better'.

Augustus slants her eyes over at it. "I round up," she asserts, stubborn. And then, "My shirt is *really* wet."

The Changeling has never been very good at having comforting words. What it does have is dry clothes. "There are several extra large shirts in my room," it tells her. It does not get up yet. "Then we can move blankets to the living room couch." It turns the order of operations it had come up with over in its head, trying to think through the headache beginning to fog up its brain.

"And then we can watch Sonic," it adds belatedly, as Augustus tilts her head and looks at it, teeth chewing into her tongue. "I have your glasses. They did not break."

She sniffs. "Yeah, okay."

So Changeling rises up to its feet, blinking heavily through the dizziness that rises with it. It blinks its eyes deliberately to clear them, assures itself this is postictal, and settles itself more firmly onto its feet in order to lead Augustus back down the hall into its room.

"Thank you for asking your mom to let me stay the night," Augustus says as Changeling sorts through its shirts for one of the larger ones that will be able to fit her. It does not have any pants in her size, but it will get her a blanket off its bed so she can cover up and that will be good enough. Perhaps she should bring a few outfits to keep at Changeling's house should this ever occur again. "It's-, it would be, I'm-,"

she pauses, and sighs, and tries again. "I did not want to have to figure out how I would have gotten my car home," she says, each word stilted and precise.

Changeling has the vague notion that it should reply as it hands her the shirt, but does not get a chance to discover what this response might be before Augustus is already stripping off her wet clothes, shaking the lingering dampness off of her skin in unsettled discomfort. Abruptly, the Changeling becomes aware of the fact that it is staring at her — at the curve of her stomach, the way it paunches out over the waistband of her underwear and jiggles as she moves, and the dark thatch of hair there that creeps up towards her chest.

"I had a seizure," it hears itself blurt out instead, deliberately dragging its gaze away from her, up into the far corner of its ceiling. Its face feels hot; it tries to determine if there are any other auras in its vision again. When it was younger, one seizure usually meant several, but they are significantly less frequent these days. It decides its stomach feels off, but not in an oncoming seizure way. "Earlier in the hall. I may have another. If I become non-responsive, that is likely why."

"kay," Augustus says, muffled through the new shirt as she pulls it over her head, lifting her hair away from the collar as soon as it is on and shaking her head awkwardly through a tic. "Do you need, should you tell your mom about it?"

It had forgotten. It stoops down to retrieve its phone to text her: *'Focal aware. Less than a minute. Roughly.'* There is a dedicated folder in its AAC app to make this process easier even when the postictal symptoms are at their worst. When it looks up again, Augustus is still fumbling with her hair, squeezing water out of its length with the towel she'd brought into the room with her. Watching, Changeling realizes it does not have anything to offer her to help her with it — no brushes or rubber bands. Annoying.

(When it was a puppy, it had owned a doll with long black hair. In its head, Changeling had called it Rita, although everyone else had called it Mary because it could not tell them its real name. Eventually, the doll was lost when Changeling had attempted to make it better resemble its namesake by driving a nail through its forehead, unable to understand how this would shatter the porcelain. Before that, however, the Changeling had enjoyed braiding its hair. The thought feels like too much in its head. Does it even recall how to do it? It swallows the image down like a metaphorical hot coal instead of allowing it to pass over its tongue.)

"Can we really watch Sonic?" Augustus asks, head twitching to the side.

Changeling hands her a blanket from its bed so that she can wrap it around her waist. "Yes," it replies, pulling itself back up off the floor again — the dizziness is not quite as bad now. "You have mentioned it before, and tonight is difficult. I do not mind trying new things. We can sleep on the couch," it adds, gathering a few additional blankets to bring with them. When another peal of thunder rumbles out overhead, it remembers to add its ear defenders to its pile.

"I've never had a sleepover before," Augustus confesses softly, leaning in over its shoulder, as if this thought is a secret.

The Changeling blinks. It had not quite put together these pieces in its head the right way before, it realizes. That is the correct term; Augustus is spending the night at its house, which is the definition of having a sleepover.

"Me neither," it says distantly. It feels something about this revelation, it is certain, but cannot decipher what it could be. Simply feels it, lurking in the hollow spaces of its rib cage. It wraps the blanket around its shoulder and attempts to peel it apart.

Meanwhile, Augustus settles herself on one side of the sectional, and the Changeling moves to occupy the opposite

edge, curling its legs up onto the cushion. The feeling is something warm, it decides, watching as Augustus takes the remote to pull up the show she wants to watch. Generally speaking, it is worse at deciphering the specifics of positive emotions in comparison to negative ones. The feeling *is* warm, soft around the edges, but Changeling cannot determine the specifics any more clearly than that.

Whatever, it thinks, watching the show begin to unfold. Exhaustion settles inside of its head, but Changeling finds no desire to sleep. Not yet, at least. Its first sleepover has only just begun, and it is its understanding that going to bed on time is not a typical part of the process. It rolls its head back against the couch, closing its eyes against the faint ache building up between its eyebrows; this is *different* from going to sleep, which it is not doing.

"I'm *waiting*," Augustus chirps under her breath, matching the pitch and cadence of the Sonic character on screen exactly as he says it. It is, Changeling thinks, unfortunately endearing.

Above them both, the thunder rumbles on.





3. sit in the car and I listen to static

"Of course you eat lunch in your car," the Changeling says scornfully, leaned over just enough to glare at Augustus through the few inches of car window she keeps cracked as as to avoid overheating during her lunch break (she prefers to keep the engine and AC off as long as possible; she hates going to get gas). The longer fur on the sides of its dog ears rustles in the breeze; Augustus imagines them twitching at her in feigned irritation.

"Duh," she retorts lightly, unlocking the doors and waiting for her friend to clamber into the passenger seat before continuing. "The break room — *if* it can be called that — is an affront. It always smells like John's weird soups in there. And the lights are terrible."

They aren't fluorescent light bulbs, at least, but they *are* awful. Dim enough to be grating, especially since the room is small and windowless; barely enough space for the table, which is itself barely big enough to sit two people. Any time someone enters the room, they risk bumping against her arms, and there is not enough room to not be looked at, and Augustus hates the pinned bug feeling this gives her. She can barely stand to linger in the glorified closet long enough to

store her bag in her locker — she harbors absolutely no desire to stay long enough to eat in there.

Changeling fumes about this for a moment, because Augustus is correct and they both know it. "You look like a creep," it settles on saying eventually."

"You are the one who got into the car with me," Augustus replies neutrally, pausing to take another bite of her sandwich. She does not bother pausing to chew before she goes on to ask, "Your shift is not scheduled for another hour — why are you here already?"

The Changeling's posture goes stiffer than usual, chin tucking down against its chest. The ears in Augustus' mind pin back against its skull unhappily. She shifts in her seat and feels the ghost of fur under the pads of her fingers, but restrains her desire before her hands attempt to reach out to fulfill it. Changeling does not like people grabbing its ears — this is a Rule that Augustus will not forget again.

(She had forgotten once, early on in their friendship, and had remembered too late — only after Changeling had shoved her back *hard*, recoiling from her with something wild in its face. "People used to pull on them," it had admittedly softly once it had calmed itself down — an ordeal that had taken over twenty miserable minutes while Augustus sat on her hands and apologized. She is determined to never forget this again.)

"My mother was called in for an emergency shift," it explains tightly. "So she could not drive me at the correct time. She informed me I would simply have to wait inside the store until my scheduled shift arrived."

"Oh, gross, don't do that," Augustus supplies immediately, and then forces herself to course-correct, head twitching to the side. "Or, I mean, you *could*, like it's allowed, but you don't have to. My lunch break just started, so you can just sit with me instead."

The Changeling turns its head just enough to stare at her from the corners of its eyes. "Obviously," it says, and its tone broadcasts the implicit 'Idiot' so clearly that even Augustus can hear it. The whole thing makes her feel unbearably fond.

Her eyes blink hard — once, twice, three times. "Do you want some saltines?" she asks, swallowing back the emotion so she doesn't have to think about it. She shifts her legs so that they will not go numb underneath her, and holds the sleeve of crackers out in offering.

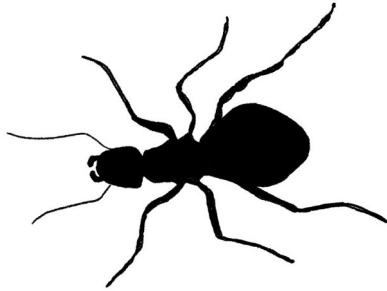
"Yes," Changeling answers, accepting them. It adjusts its seating position as well, bracing its weight against the center console to cross its legs in the limited space of the passenger seat, reaching back to make sure the tail clipped to its belt-loop doesn't get caught under its boots. Augustus' car is not very big, so she supposes it is a good thing they both like to sit very folded up anyway — at least it's an easier fit.

She still kind of wishes they could both be home and sitting on the Changeling's couch instead. Alas, they both have a three hour shift to look forward to before that becomes an option.

"I had forgotten how disgusting your car is," the Changeling is saying, clearly distracted from the saltine in its hand by the crumbs scattered inside the foot well beneath it, judging by the glare it is directing down there. "I am surprised that you do not have ants."

"Oh, I do," Augustus laughs, head twitching to the side as she points down at the gear shift where an ant is scuttling around over the center console as they speak. The majority of the debris has congregated there due to how Augustus typically sits when she eats here alone most days. It's like a cut-away gag in a cartoon, she thinks as Changeling redirects its glare to the tiny arthropod. (She pointedly does not think about it any deeper than this.)

"Gross," Changeling says. It very obviously takes a moment to examine the saltines for any similar insects. It doesn't have to worry, though — Augustus has gotten quite skilled at keeping them separate.



She shrugs. "There's not a lot of them," she offers, blinking hard. The consonants come out of her mouth softer than they might normally, but that is what the Changeling has earned for being so easy to let her guard down around. Augustus doesn't even feel the need to repeat herself with the proper enunciation — even at her most inarticulate, the Changeling has always seemingly been able to understand her. The thought settles very warm in her chest, and so she halts the train of it before it can go further, and watches the ant scamper off between two pieces of plastic paneling. She imagines it getting lost inside of the engine and getting burned up when she turns on the ignition — it's a little bit sad.

"Do you not vacuum?" Changeling demands.

"Yes, every Thursday." It's one of her chores, even though she has to use headphones to get through it right. "But that's inside; not in my car."

"Why not?"

Augustus readjusts her legs again, head twitching to the side. She finishes the rest of her sandwich and this time, she does delay speaking in order to chew and swallow. She had not been prepared to have a conversation about the state of her

car; she typically does not even prefer to think about it most days — it's too difficult.

"I just don't like to," she admits finally, her tongue catching thickly in her mouth. Her hands feel stiff and ugly in her lap, and she shakes them out anxiously. She does not want Changeling to ask why again, she realizes, eyes blinking hard as she shifts her gaze out of the side window to one of the bushes outside, its leaves full of bees. Her stomach hurts. If it does ask, then she will have to admit that she does not *know* why, and then if it asks her again, she will be forced to explain that it is easier to just ignore the mess and make sure the ants do not make it into her food than it is to figure out why she does not know why she cannot just force herself to do the task despite her undefined reluctance. It is too hard to think about why vacuuming the car outside is scarier than vacuuming the carpets inside — trying makes her chest feel all tight.

(Augustus' emotions are always too big to look at directly. Even just trying to see and understand them is unbearably overwhelming, so it is *better* to just pretend they are not there at all. Better for her and for everyone else; nothing good comes from emotions that big, she knows it. She tries very hard to make them smaller, and people *still* tell her that they are over-dramatic and exaggerated, so it is better to just not think about them at all. And if the ignoring just makes things harder than they are supposed to be, then, well, not looking is basically the same thing as not noticing, right? So it is *fine*.)

Augustus knows that it's stupid to not just be able to do it — her dad tells her so all the time. She will not really mind if Changeling also wants to tell her that it's dumb, but if it just asks Why, then Augustus will be forced to keep thinking about it just to still not be able to come up with an answer.

It is disgustingly uncomfortable, but the notion of admitting this to ask Changeling not to ask is even worse.

But Changeling is not asking. When Augustus clenches her hands into fists and risks looking back at her friend to see what it is doing, it puffs its body up in an exaggerated pantomime of irritation. The process is kind of fascinating to watch — how each adjustment is made with deliberate intention: brows furrowed, shoulders up, arms crossed, mouth pulled down. She imagines its ears flicking forward, tail stiff and straight. "Fine," it says, heavy on a sigh. Augustus blinks. "In this case, you should park in the driveway when you drive me home tonight. I suppose I will have to vacuum it for you."

Augustus' chest tightens unbearably, her whole body stiffening with emotion. She is so taken aback by this declaration that her mouth actually hangs open, as if she were some kind of cartoon character. "Really?" she asks, and is so distracted by the sensations in her body that for once, she hardly even notices how terribly the consonants smear in her mouth.

People never just *offer* to help. They ask Why, and then they get mad when Augustus says she does not *know* why, and then only *maybe* will they acquiesce once the conversation has caused enough stress that Augustus loses control and can't stop herself from melting down about it. Maybe. Mostly instead, Augustus is forced to try and fail and fail and fail and then try to find the words to ask, and then continue to ask since she is typically ignored the first time, by people who presume that the resistance will somehow manifest an ability in Augustus to perform the impossible. No one ever just *offers*. She does not have a script for this.

"Do *not* read into this," Changeling instructs firmly. It is still puffed up in exaggerated irritation, but Augustus' brain imagines its tail wagging despite its best attempts to stop it. "This is a favor primarily to myself, to spare me the psychic damage I can feel myself sustaining with each passing moment."

Augustus takes a very deep breath and expels it, trying very hard to relax her body before she loses control over it. She stops thinking about anything other than the bees outside, the way they buzz clumsily around one another in confused, rhythmic patterns. She folds up the big, overwhelming emotion in her chest and tucks it away inside of the back of her head where it can further away and smaller. "Thank you, Changeling," she says once she finished, and knows her tone comes out too soft for how her friend's scowl deepens, but she can still see how its human ears have flushed a very dark red. There is an impulse to touch, to push, to explain, but Augustus knows that it is better to both of them to refrain from doing so. The emotions are simply too big; if she looks at them for too long, the dam will break, and that is no good. So instead she says, "Maybe then I will remember to take the trash in the back out as well, for once."

This is a safer topic to think about — there is no mystery there. That truly is as simple as Augustus forgetting about the task, since the trash bag sits in the back seat, where Augustus cannot see it to remember to take it out when she returns home from work at night. She usually only thinks about it during lunch when she is throwing things away back there, and then forgets to write it down since her car doesn't have any post-it notes in it, and then forgets to think about it again until her next lunch break. This is also stupid, of course, but at least it is not overwhelming.

As intended, this new revelation catches the Changeling off-guard. It drops its irritated affect in favor of turning to survey the grocery bag on the verge of overflowing into the foot well behind it with a heated, "Jesus christ."

The tension breaks, and Augustus falls back against her side window in a fit of giggles. It feels *good* in one of those hazy, undefinable ways she only really feels around the

Changeling — settled into her body and nearly comfortable there. For a moment, she even forgets to feel worried about it.

Isn't that something?



*4. it tears through my head, does
it haunt you too?*

Rosemary had let the Changeling clock out a little early today.

This does not actually mean much to anyone, because Augustus is the one who actually drives it home after work, and her own shift will not end until she finishes shutting down the store after it closes in approximately 25 minutes.

So, in actuality, Changeling is just stuck sitting on the couch in the comic section instead of sitting in a chair in the back office. Augustus is the one left stuck on the front register, knowing that the only things standing between her and finally getting to go home are the two customers in the stacks who will not leave.

Really, given the circumstances, Augustus is the one being forced to endure inconvenient suffering this evening. She feels as though she has never been more aware of the passage of time as she is right now, when every individual moment seems to be passing with excruciating slowness. Changeling can do whatever it wants to over on its couch, but Augustus still has to go through the motions of doing her job and trying to look 'attentive' for whenever those customers decide they'll finally come up to her register.

Augustus really hopes it will be soon — she has always been notoriously bad at having to wait for things.

She squirms restlessly some more, hands clenching awkwardly at her sides in a poor attempt to be subtle as she casts her gaze around the store. She thinks she's looking to see where the customers are, but also isn't very surprised when she finds herself looking at the Changeling again instead. Despite the agony of Augustus' own impatient overstimulation, it has actually been rather nice to have the Changeling at the front like this. The two of them have been working together at the bookstore for a few weeks now, but Augustus does not often get to spend actual time with it while they are on the clock. She is usually working at the registers at the front of the store, where Changeling almost never leaves the office in the back, so they do not actually tend to overlap with one another.

So, it is kind of nice to get to see it at work for once, although the Changeling is not actually working, currently. It is still present here, where Augustus can see it from her register and watch it as it sits in the patch of sun where it is setting, rocking back and forth slightly with its legs tucked up underneath it. She keeps catching herself looking at it — little glances stolen out of the corners of her eyes, like she is checking to make sure it is still there. Every time she sees that it is, she feels a little steadier, like some nerves she didn't even know about are getting soothed. So at least that's nice.

But it's not the same as being at home, obviously. Augustus is still stuck listening to the obnoxious Top 40 list being played out over the store speakers, and squinting out under the too-white lights overhead, while she tries to look attentive for two customers who probably aren't even paying attention. She can tell Changeling isn't very happy about it either. It is better at being patient than Augustus is, but she can still see it scowling unhappily under its sunglasses, and it

keeps reaching up to tug on its dog ears self-consciously, adjusting the headband in little, compulsive fits. If things were very bad for it, it would have come to get Augustus' keys so that it could wait in her car, but even if it *can* handle it for now, Augustus knows it never likes to sit in public — it can never get comfortable when other strangers can see it.

It'd be really nice if these customers could go ahead and hurry up then, so that she and Changeling could just leave already.

"God, I *know*, just look at him," one titters to the other as they finally begin to meander their way slowly to the front. They approach closely enough for Augustus to get her hopes up and stop swaying in order to look 'attentive' for when they get to her register, but her hopes are dashed when they appear to get distracted by one of the line displays, halting their progress. Augustus bites back the urge to groan in frustration.

"It's crazy!" the second customer squeals. Their voices are hushed, like they are trying not to be overheard. Augustus clasps her hands together tightly, for a moment attempting to readjust her attention as best as she can manage it onto the overhead music, to be courteous, as eavesdropping is rude. She has never been very good at this, however, which is why she hears it when the customer continues, "The sunglasses *and* the dog ears? Like there's so much going on there."

The words take a moment to connect right in her head, but a very hot feeling spikes in Augustus' throat the second they do. She tangles all her fingers together and yanks until they ache a little; she does not know if it is better to keep listening or try to stop. She casts an anxious glance toward the Changeling, and feels only the slightest bit relieved on its behalf to confirm that it has its headphones on. She does not know what she is supposed to do.

"Just when you think those kids who like, hiss and growl on the playground could grow up normal," the customers

continue to laugh, heads bent together. "Do you think he'd bark if we said something to him?"

"Don't even joke — did you see the look on his face? He's probably crazy; I'm surprised they even let him in here."

Augustus cannot figure out what to do about this, and it is making it difficult for her to catch her breath. Her chest feels as though it is buzzing with nerves; her head does not feel much better. Something like a memory pulls on the back of her neck, and Augustus flinches from it before it can coalesce. Her hands feel numb and sweaty, but she is too nervous to even shake them out — frozen and uncertain.

One time, a customer on the phone had gotten mad and asked to talk to a different manager because they said Augustus' lisp was too hard to understand. When Augustus had transferred them to Rosemary, she had scolded the customer for being mean instead of yelling at Augustus. Today, though, Rosemary had left when she'd told the Changeling it could leave — she is not around for Augustus to ask for help this time, and Augustus cannot remember well enough what she had said to repeat it herself. The realization just makes her feel even worse — torn between the frustration of not being able to think clearly enough to come up with a solution, and something hot and shameful, that she can't figure out how to handle it without asking someone else for help.

Then one of the customers pulls out their phone, and Augustus startles so badly she thinks she almost throws up.

"I can ring you up if you are ready," she blurts loudly, hands tangled anxiously in the front of her flannel. This is not necessarily conducive to stopping the customers from insulting Changeling further, but maybe if Augustus can just get them rung up, they will get distracted and leave before they can keep laughing with each other, or try to do something worse like take a photograph of her friend without its

permission just so they can keep making fun of it. Maybe Augustus can't *stop* them, but she can maybe just get rid of them instead.

"Oh, yeah, thanks," the first woman says, and Augustus attempts to shove the bad-anxious feeling in her chest back towards the back of her head, letting out a little breath of relief when the customer puts her phone back in her pocket to bring her books up to the counter. Usually, Augustus has a script for customers when they do that, but she is too frazzled to remember what it is before she starts scanning things. She resolves to just go as quickly as she can when the customer asks, "Does that guy hang out here a lot?" into the empty space left behind instead.

Augustus stumbles, halting awkwardly in the middle of opening a bag for the books, remembering too late that she was supposed to ask about that right as she tugs it through the air to open it up the right way. "Do you need a bag?" she asks on that belated impulse, before she can even find words to think about the question she had been asked. She feels the back of her neck go hot with embarrassment, but cannot figure out why she even *cares*.

"Hm? Sure," the woman answers, right at the very same time her friend asks, "Does he always have those ears on?"

There is so much laugh in her voice that even Augustus can hear it, plain as day. The very hot feeling escapes its shelf in the back of her head and goes back to being in her chest, intensified further, so big and overwhelming that it makes her throat ache, and Augustus almost feels like she can taste it on the back of her tongue — sharp and metallic. It is a very old feeling, a very familiar one.

Augustus does not like it.

"You are being mean," she chokes out before she can stop herself, shoulders hitching up uncomfortably as she clumsily clicks through the rest of the register screens. She

makes a frantic effort to swallow the weight of the feelings back into something manageable, tries not to focus on them. "Your total is 31.98," she adds stiffly, because she has to, even though she would really prefer it if they'd just leave without waiting for the books at all. Augustus feels shaky and sick; she digs her nails into the center of her palm and tries to remember how to breathe.

(This is not a new situation. It is one that Augustus is very familiar with, one that she should be used to, but she still never knows what to do with herself in the face of it. A lot of kids had left Augustus alone, because she had always been one of the biggest kids in her schools, but plenty of them knew that she was very easy to trick and tease and laugh at no matter how much bigger than them she was. Augustus should be used to it, but even all these years later she still feels very sick to think about it. She and Changeling do not talk about it, but Augustus *knows* that people have been very mean to it too, especially when it was younger. Changeling is *not* very big at all. Augustus does not like to think about it; she likes being confronted with it to her face even less.)

"It's not mean," the customer who does not actually appear to be buying anything says. Her tone is sharp, like Augustus is the one who had offended her somehow. Augustus feels her face twitch in a series of wincing and tries not to recoil, putting the receipt in the bag and wanting very badly for this all to be over already. "Haven't you noticed how strangely he's behaving back there?"

Augustus swallows thickly, hands tense and shaking. "You are being mean," she reasserts, because they are, but she tries to sound calmer about it. Tries to hide the emotion away before they can see it, before it can begin to overwhelm her again. She cannot tell if they really think that they are not being mean, but they *are*. "He is not hurting anyone," she

adds, because they said 'strange' like they meant 'dangerous', and that is absurd.

(She very carefully does not call Changeling 'it' to these women, because they are strangers, and Changeling's pronouns are only for her to know and use — it had told her so. They said 'he', so Augustus does too. Even though it makes the sentence feel strange in her throat, the secret feels very big and important in Augustus' chest. She does not know what to say to get the customers to stop making fun of her friend, but at least she can protect it this much.)

"We were just *concerned*," the customer says, picking up the bag with her books in it.

Augustus wants to yell for them to just get out already; she can feel the impulse burning in her throat, can imagine the strain of her voice raising up louder than she means it to. It makes the anxious feeling worse. She does not like to yell at people; she does not think she is allowed to raise her voice at customers, even if it *would* be warranted. "Well, don't," she manages to say instead, her tongue trips clumsily in her mouth, but at least it did not come out shouting. "He is not doing anything wrong just because you don't like his clothes. It is not nice to laugh at people."

One of them makes a scoffing noise in her throat; Augustus' chest goes hot, like maybe she thinks she should not have said that. She isn't sure what is behind the feeling — the Changeling is very private, so maybe she should not say too much about it to these people, even in its defense; or maybe she is worried about upsetting these women, even though she does not actually care what they think, things could always get worse if Augustus pushes back too far. She remembers that well enough. She makes another desperate attempt to pack up the emotion, to make it smaller, to hide it in a box and hide the box in the back of her head where it cannot get back out, where no one can see it. It makes her feel strange and numb,

but she makes herself do it anyway, until she can breathe in a full breath again.

"Is there a manager we could speak to about these concerns? I would have thought you'd take customer safety more seriously than this," the customer's friend asks, saying the word *concern* very hard like that will somehow make it more true.

Augustus wants to cover her ears and hide behind the counter and not have to be a part in this interaction anymore. *What are you accomplishing with this?* she does not ask. She holds onto the distant cold feeling and does not let go of it. "I am the only manager on shift right now," she says instead, adjusting her shoulders anxiously, "because the store closed two minutes ago. Can you leave?" she asks, before she can pause to take the time to think of the 'right' way to ask that question. She is very tired all of a sudden; she does not want to expend anymore effort than she already has on this conversation.

She fixes her stare on the flat surface of the counter, and thinks of old lunch tables, and does not move or say anything else.

"Well," one of them snips. "We *won't* be shopping here again, then."

Good, Augustus does not snap back. That would not accomplish anything either. She is already being too dramatic, and that would just make it worse. "Have a nice day," she says instead, the words stumbling out of her mouth almost on automatic instinct as they finally back away from her register and start to walk towards the exit door.

Augustus watches them storm away out of the corners of her eyes, making sure that they do not come back or try to approach the Changeling or try to take their phones out again, and breathes out the anxious sob that has been caught in her

lungs when the door finally closes behind them without incident.

Her hands are still shaking when she goes to lock the door. Augustus brushes the tears out of her eyes and tries not to think about it any further.



Changeling often wears headphones while it is out in public.

Rarely does it ever actually listen to anything with them.

So, when the two customers left in the store while Changeling waits for Augustus' shift to end begin to talk about it, laughing and exchanging insults with one another, Changeling hears it all.

Their words are nothing Changeling has not heard before. It has been wearing its ears in public since it was in middle school — it has heard almost every kind of insult there is to hear about them. The Changeling is not oblivious to the fact that people think the ears are weird, it just does not care. People made fun of it before it started wearing them, and they made fun of it after. If someone wants to laugh at it, they will find some reason to laugh; Changeling will not bother to play the game of attempting to preempt every possible avenue of insult to protect itself, it knows well enough that it could never succeed in hiding them all.

It has been a *while* since it has heard these things, of course, but that is only because before this job, Changeling had not really left its house in years. When it had decided to try employment, and Augustus had sworn that Rosemary was nice and would not protest Changeling's ears or sunglasses or anything else about it, Changeling had still known to be

prepared to face the insults again. It would only be a matter of time before *someone* decided they had something to say.

Therefore, it is not a shock when that time finally comes. Changeling listens to them laugh at it, and sits very carefully in its spot on the couch, and feels the sun on its skin and smooths the fur on its ears between its fingers, and thinks to itself that they are not even very original about their insults at all.

(Changeling has faced bigger villains. Ones who grabbed at it in locker rooms and called it freak and retard and stole its homework and yanked on its ears and tail and shouted over its shoulders and shined bright lights into its eyes and shoved it in hallways and... Well, there was a *reason* why Changeling had never actually finished high school.)

It keeps listening as they walk around and past it, up to the registers. It is usually better to *know* than to be left wondering, and it is certainly for the best to keep track of where they are in the environment, so that it cannot be caught off-guard should they decide to try to approach it to escalate things directly. That is the purpose of wearing the headphones without listening to anything, after all — the Changeling does not like to be sneaked up on, or caught off-guard, it is always better to give oneself the upper hand.

It is all very typical. Almost boring. At least until it hears Augustus' voice, loud and clear: "You are being mean."

At that, Changeling finds itself taken aback, although it is careful to not react. Augustus had spoken too loud, because she often does, but her voice had a wavering edge to it that Changeling does not recall having heard from her before. It steals a glance at the registers out of the corner of its eyes — it can see her face, because she is taller than both the strangers, but it cannot see the rest of her body behind the register and the counter. It wishes it could see, it realizes; it

can never tell very much by looking at people's faces, but it can read Augustus' stimming rather well by now.

Something strange feels caught inside of its rib-cage, though. It does not really understand what or why. Perhaps it is worried about Augustus? But it has felt that before, and that does not feel right. Or, at least not *wholly* right.

Then it thinks that it is not sure if it has ever heard anyone else speak in its defense before. Not really. The feeling in its throat intensifies at the thought, sharp and aching.

(Adults *would* interfere, occasionally, in the cases when things would get more dangerous or destructive than usual. Adults would also, much more often, look back at Changeling — left trembling and irate in the wake of a confrontation — and say, "You certainly don't make it easy for yourself, do you?". Changeling is awful at interpreting other people's intentions, it always has been, but even *it* could tell which response they had meant more.)

It sways uncertainly in its seat, and continues to listen as the women pivot from making fun of Changeling to talking as though they are afraid of it now. This is also old ground retread; Changeling had frequently found itself labeled as a threat for biting other children, or for shoving back when other people shoved it first, or for the times it would get so upset that it would hurt itself and break things, or even just because it had to use the same locker room as other people. These women do not know any of that, though — there is no well-established rumor pool in this store — so Changeling finds it difficult to believe them. It has seen enough horror movies to know that people do not often take the time to point and laugh when they are frightened, after all.

"You are being mean," Augustus reaffirms, unswayed, and shuttles the customers out of the store swiftly afterwards, and goes to lock the doors behind them.

The tension Changeling had stored in its legs, just in case it would have to stand up and run, fades. It watches surreptitiously as Augustus shakes out her arms and shifts her weight from foot to foot, and hears her hum out an anxious noise before whispering, "Okay, it's okay, they left," to herself, almost inaudible underneath the sound of the radio.

Augustus returns to the register to finish closing out the store. The Changeling rocks back and forth where it sits, and tries to understand.

People do not stand up for it. Truthfully, Changeling supposes they have no reason to. Most of the things the Changeling has been mocked for are, of course, objectively true. It *is* a dyke, it *is* autistic, it *is weird*, and it knows these things about itself. Everyone else knows it, too.

"You certainly don't make it easy for yourself, do you?", "We can intervene with what we see, but maybe you need to have a serious talk with your daughter about not provoking the other students so much", "Why didn't you at least try to be normal?". Everyone says it, in one way or another. They might stop people from trying to set off a seizure, but they do not stand up for the Changeling because there are no lies to defend it against; it is its own fault it always finds itself in this circumstance.

Perhaps the Changeling could have *earned* their protection, if it was ever willing to subject itself to the requirements that protection seemed to demand. It never had, though, because it had never wanted to. Changeling has never been particularly smart, but it is not a *fool* — sitting still and taking off its ears and tail and carefully policing its voice and face and interests would not save it. Other people can see through its thin attempts at masking no matter how hard it could try. The goalpost is constantly moving, pulling back again and again every time Changeling could find itself near one. It will not play the game of trying and failing to preempt every possible avenue of insult to force itself into a different

shape, not when it knows well enough that it could *never* succeed in the effort.

So, it did not bother. People would insult it no matter what it did, so it might as well do what it liked. If that meant it was left to fight its battles on its own, then it would be fine with that. Changeling had always been a lone wolf; it was used to this.

Augustus is something new. Something unexpected. But perhaps the Changeling should have anticipated that — Augustus is very unlike anyone Changeling has ever met before.

The thought is only reaffirmed when Augustus comes to the couch to get it after she has clocked out. She approaches from the front, even though the back of the store is set almost directly *behind* the couch Changeling sits on; she goes through this effort only because she knows Changeling does not like to be sneaked up on.

Something in the Changeling's chest is wound too tightly for Changeling to feel particular *warmth* at the thought, but it thinks it can feel a flicker of the sentiment anyway.

"Ughh, today was long," Augustus complains as they walk to her car, her footsteps very large and stomping. Her voice is not shaking like it had when Changeling had overheard her earlier, but her hands are still very restless as they swing at her sides. "Can I come over? I want to watch a show with you."

Changeling is very nearly confused, before it realizes abruptly that Augustus has no reason to know it does not listen to music when it wears headphones in public. She has no reason to think it had overheard those women laughing at it, so she has no reason to think to mention it, and is clearly not going to go out of her way to tell Changeling about it. It feels strangely like it has stumbled on a missed stair-step at this, like Augustus has disrupted an unspoken routine, but then cannot imagine a scenario in which it would *like* it if



Augustus were to trot out a series of insults she had heard levied at it when it was not present. Even though the sentiments were not her own, they would still sting from her mouth.

It swallows the strange taste on the back of its tongue and redirects its gaze out over the parking lot, watching the streetlights as they begin to turn on.

(*Tiffany* used to tell it everything, it thinks, when she had begun coming to Changeling's house after it could no longer continue to force itself to endure the tribulation that was public school. Their friendship had only sprung into existence because she had wanted to apologize, for her hand in the torment that had driven it out, but she had continued to tell it the things other people said about it in its absence. She said she would have preferred to know, so Changeling had thought that it *must* be better to know than to be left wondering. Looking back, Changeling thinks maybe it would have preferred not to be told at all. Had that not been exactly why it had left?)

"Yes, come over," Changeling finally answers, and tries to find the thread of their usual back-and-forth regarding which shows are best and which among them they should watch. Instead, the tight feeling in its chest emerges all at once as a question: "Do you wish we knew each other in high school?"

Changeling looks very fixedly out of the passenger window. It had not known it was going to ask that.

"Yeah," Augustus answers promptly. "Well, I mean, we wouldn't have, just because I am older than you, obviously. You were in middle school when I was in high school, and then when you got to high school, I was graduated," she continues on, pedantic, but Changeling cannot hold it against her. "But I still think about it sometimes. Like, maybe if I had always lived here, we would have met after school one day or something, and we could have been friends even as kids. It would have been cool. I would have liked to be childhood friends with you."

"Do you think we would have been?" Changeling asks, insistent, feeling a little skeptical and not immediately knowing why.

("Why didn't you just *try* to be normal?" *Tiffany* had asked, too blunt, because she often is.)

("I did not want to," Changeling had answered, too incomplete, because it always has been.)

"Yes, *totally*," Augustus answers, quick, as though she does not even have to think about it. "'Cause I liked Yu-Gi-Oh way more when I was younger, so we would have played together. I *was* kind of scared of dogs, I guess, but you were just a puppy, so you wouldn't have scared me. Or, mm, maybe you would have, but I would have talked to you anyway because I like Yu-Gi-Oh that much, and then I wouldn't have been scared of you after."

She hums out a noise low in her throat, which means she is still thinking about saying something, so Changeling does not interrupt. "It *would* have been nice, to be your friend," she says eventually, quieter. Changeling glances at her out of the corner of its eyes — she is looking out at the road because she is a safe driver, but her hands are very tight on the wheel. Tighter than usual, it thinks, watching her fingernails pluck restlessly at the leather. "It would have been nice. I didn't have very many. I'm- People didn't bother me, too-, too bad, because I was always like, the biggest kid in school," she says, the words coming so quickly they run into each other unsteadily, strange-paced and pressured in her throat. "But. I'm. It would have been nice to be your friend for my whole life. It would have been fun."

The Changeling looks back out of the passenger side window and lets out the breath caught in its lungs. Carefully, it lets itself imagine it. Even though they are not the same age, it *would* have been nice, to have a place to go after the school day had ended, to be able to forget the awful things that had happened and replace them with something better. Things would only have been better, if they *could* have been in the same grade as each other. Augustus always says she has always been exactly how she is now; it would have been nice, to know

someone like her when it was younger. They really *could* have been friends for their whole lives.

("They said awful things, and they all laughed at you. And I laughed too, because it was easier, because it was what they did," Tiffany had confessed that first afternoon, teary, and Changeling had stood behind its mother in the doorway, and wondered if she was saying so only because they had been friends when they were much younger. Later, it wondered if she even remembered they had been friends once at all. "And then you stopped showing up, and I thought it was all my fault.")

("It was not," Changeling had told her, and that was something incomplete too.)

Maybe Changeling could have even finished high school, it thinks idly, staring up at the moon. If other kids had truly left Augustus alone, then maybe it would have been left alone too, if she was there next to it. Then again, Changeling reconsiders, Augustus cannot always tell when she is being messed with, and she is not very good at speaking up for herself. She is likely understating how bad things had been, for her. Maybe it is more likely that the Changeling would have had to defend her, then; if she had not had friends when she was younger, then perhaps they are the same, and no one had defended her either. She deserves someone who would stand up for her — Changeling could have been good at that. It has never been very good with words, but it has got a *very* mean bite.

Changeling had been something of a rabid dog when it was younger, but maybe if it had known Augustus it would not have had to be.

There is not much use thinking about it either way, though, it concludes, bringing itself back down to reality. Changeling and Augustus are not the same age, and Augustus' family did not move here until her younger sister was the one

in high school, and so Changeling and Augustus did not meet until they were in their twenties, and that is the only way it has ever been, and therefore the only way it will ever be.

Maybe it is for the best they had not met until they were older. Changeling had been something of a rabid dog when it was younger, the kind of angry that no one else knew what to do with. Maybe it is for the best that they had not met until they were in their twenties, after Changeling had all those years to learn how to breathe out and shed the hurt like old fur instead of always locking its jaw tight around it. Maybe they had met at just exactly the right time.

Maybe it does not matter either way. Time travel does not exist in real life, no matter what you want from it.

Still. "It would have been fun," it agrees, and leans its head against the window so that it can glance at Augustus from the corner of its eye.

She does not look back, because she is still focused on driving, and Changeling cannot decipher the look on her face, but the sun shines behind her like it wants to prove a point, and Changeling feels itself *want* so intensely it almost feels sick with it.

And then it does not want to think about any of it anymore.

"We should watch Yu-Gi-Oh," it says eventually.

Her answering smile is, at least, easy to interpret.



*5. and when we find out what's
wrong with me, could you tell me
how I'm right for you?*

"I am going over to my friend's house," Augustus calls, kneeling down in the entryway to pull her shoes onto her feet as she says goodbye.

"Oh," Aurora says from the couch, looking up from her phone like she's surprised. Her new ear piercing glints a little in the light as she moves; Augustus can feel her own piercing very vaguely in her nose. She has been waiting since she got it to see if it'll start hurting, but it hasn't yet. She hadn't even really noticed when the very tall butch at the piercing place had put the needle through there.

("And, hold that breath," she'd said, and so Augustus had, and also did a pretty good job of not jumping when the woman had proceeded to sort of yank on her nose. "Alright, how're you feeling?" she'd asked next. Augustus had blinked, confused, and asked if she had done it already, trying to look down and figure out if she could see it for herself. Aurora had laughed lightly from the little stool where she was waiting her turn, and it was kind of nice to hear.)

"Really?" Aurora asks, her eyebrows furrowed in a Confused face, and Augustus falters a little, trying to figure out what the problem might be.

Aurora doesn't come home from college *a lot*, but she had decided she was visiting this time very suddenly, and shown up this morning. It had been a fun birthday surprise — they had gone with their dad to get dinner together, which had been nice. At some point, Augustus had mentioned how she has been wanting to get a piercing for a while but hasn't yet, and Aurora had said she'd also been wanting to get her ear pierced a second time, and then offered to drive them both to the tattoo place to get pierced together as a gift.

(Just the driving and the company was the gift part — Augustus had paid for the piercing herself. That was good, though, because now Augustus has her own reward punch card so if she goes back to get three more piercings, she will get the fifth one free. Just having Aurora there with her had been most of what Augustus had needed in the first place, too, so it was not underappreciated. Augustus can never figure out the right way to do things when she is by herself, and so Aurora had taken the lead so that Augustus could watch her and learn what to do. Now that she had gotten help the first time, it will be easier for Augustus to go by herself now, so she can go back and get her ears pierced without having to wait for someone to be willing to help her anymore.)

"Did, were we going to hang out more?" Augustus asks, confused. She hadn't really thought Aurora was coming just because it was Augustus' birthday, she'd kind of just thought it was coincidence because the washing machine in her dorm was getting fixed. The dinner and piercings had already been more hanging out than they usually do together these days, really.

"No," Aurora says. "It's just almost dark, isn't it? Are you okay to drive at night?"

Augustus sways in place a little, feeling a weird sort of bafflement in her stomach — hadn't she mentioned this at dinner earlier? "I don't, really," she admits. "The lights make it hard to see. But, I am spending the night, so I will not have to. I won't be driving home until the morning, so it will be fine."

She wants to think that maybe that will be it, but Aurora is still doing something with her face that makes Augustus think maybe there's more. "I will probably be back by lunch tomorrow, if you needed something," she tries to guess, sneaking a glance at the clock to check and see how much of her early head-start she has lost. Honestly, she would have thought that if Aurora wanted to tell or ask her something, she would have done it while they were at the piercing place — there had been a long wait, but Aurora had spent most of it quiet on her phone instead of talking to Augustus.

"No, you don't have to rush or anything," Aurora says quickly, eyes glancing around at the hallways like she is trying to find something. Augustus cannot think what it might be, but this seems like probably the end of the conversation — if Aurora does not need anything *tomorrow*, she probably doesn't need anything *now* — and so Augustus nods agreeably and picks up her bag again to go ahead and leave, when Aurora speaks up again to ask, "Does dad know?"

Augustus makes herself stop again, hand on the doorknob. "I told him a few days ago, I think," she says, a little confused. She would have sworn that she had mentioned it at dinner too, but she knows for sure that she had let him know about the plan as soon as she and Changeling had finalized it. She isn't sure where their dad *is* right now, exactly, but he is in the house somewhere, so even if he didn't hear Augustus just say she was leaving, then Aurora is still right there to tell him if she needs to. "If he asks, you can just tell him I'm at Spencer's house, I guess. I have my phone if you need me."

Augustus tries to think if there's something she's missing, and can't come up with anything.

She shrugs. "Anyway, bye," she says, and then hurries up and just leaves before Aurora can say anything else. Perhaps it is rude, but if Augustus waits any longer, she will be late. If there really is something else that Aurora needs, then she probably would have already said it, and if she hadn't, then Augustus will just make sure she is keeping an eye on her phone to look out for any texts.

It's not until Augustus is already halfway to the Changeling's house that she realizes that Aurora asking if their dad knew was probably meant like she was asking if Augustus had *permission* to go.

Today is Augustus' 30th birthday.

The thought sours in her stomach a little, and she clenches her hands around the steering wheel to feel the texture strain against her skin, feeling small and annoyed. This has been happening more and more lately, Augustus feels, and she does not know what to make of it or what to do about it.

It's like this: Augustus does not know exactly when Aurora had stopped looking at her like she had when they were younger. When she stopped seeing Augustus like the older sibling, the way she *should*, because Augustus *is* the older sibling. Augustus is a whole twelve years older than Aurora. Some people talk to Augustus different after they find out that she is autistic, but Augustus has had her Autism diagnosis and been in special education classrooms and speech therapies for longer than Aurora has been *alive*. Aurora has never known Augustus any other way, and the whole time they were younger, Aurora had talked to her like she was older, because she was.

Then something happened, but Augustus doesn't know what. Suddenly, it was like Augustus went from being the one who made Aurora dinner after school when their dad was at

work, and the one who did Aurora's hair in the morning after their mom moved out, and who gave up the TV so Aurora could watch what she wanted and helped fix Aurora's nightlight when the bulb burned out and looked for Aurora's toys every time they got lost to being something different.

Something less.

Augustus doesn't know where all the rest of it went. Where all the memories of that stuff hid to make Aurora think of Augustus like someone who can't take care of anything, or herself, or do anything right. Why Aurora went from arguing with their dad about the difference between how he spoke about Augustus and all the things he expected her to do, to seeming like she agrees with him about all the stuff Augustus *can't* do after all. It is getting more and more frustrating, the more it keeps happening, made worse for how Augustus cannot ever understand *why* it is happening. She can never find the words to speak about it, and even if she could, she worries she is not brave enough to even try.

(What had happened to change Aurora's mind? Was it before or after Aurora got too old to need Augustus to make her dinner and drive her everywhere? Was it because Augustus graduated high school, and listened and not really cared when all of the adults around her talked like they thought college just wasn't an option for her? Was it because the jobs Augustus always managed to get were kind of bad and didn't pay her very well? Did it happen because Augustus had never moved out of their dad's house, partly because she couldn't afford to, and part because she wasn't so sure she *could*? Was it when Aurora's friends in high school started coming over and saw that Augustus was still home like she always had been, instead of gone somewhere else like *their* older siblings were? Was it before or after Augustus had come out to her? Did it happen before or after Aurora left for college and found it was easy for her to do? Is it because Augustus *does* still need help

with things that Aurora can do by herself? *Had* Augustus done something wrong? *Was* she something embarrassing after all? The only thing that could be worse than the wondering is the *knowing* that the answer is *Yes*, and so Augustus never asks.)

(At least when their dad treats Augustus like a child, she can argue with herself that *technically*, no matter how old she gets, she *will* always be his child, and maybe that's why they get stuck at this impasse. But what is the argument that Aurora is supposed to have? Augustus has *always* been the older sister.)

Augustus parks on the curb in front of the Changeling's house and shakes all of the thoughts off as violently as she can, and then carefully fixes her glasses and her hair after. She doesn't have to think about it anymore, and she doesn't want to anyway, so she just doesn't. She packs up the hot and heavy emotions up into a box and shoves them deep inside of her chest so that they are distant and out of the way. Tomorrow, Aurora will go back to college and never call to talk to Augustus, and so as long as Augustus doesn't think about it, it will be much easier to forget that it hurts. Tonight, it is Augustus' birthday, and she is going to have a good time hanging out and having fun with her best friend, and there is nothing anything can do to change that. She nods to herself and gets her bag, makes sure that her car doors are locked, and then goes to knock on Changeling's door. There is a spider in the corner of the porch building itself a web; Augustus watches it work until Changeling opens the door.

"Hi!" she chirps, finding it a little easier to not feel sad just at the sight of it.

"What is in your nose?" Changeling asks back.

"I got it pierced! It's cool," Augustus tells it happily. "I'm not allowed to touch it yet, and I can't take it out for at least six weeks or it will begin to close. My sister came with me for my birthday, and so now that I know how to do it right, I can go back and get my ears pierced once this one heals." She

steps past it into the house, and then bends down so that Changeling can lean in and get a better look at the new little hoop in her septum. "It was cool. They were playing metal on the speakers, but I didn't hear any of the bands you like. The form let you pick pronouns, and my dad didn't come with us so I put my real ones, and they actually *used them!* The butch who did the piercing was even taller than *me*. It was a good birthday."

She finishes talking and stands back up straight so that she can kick off her shoes and put her bag down by the little table Mrs. Mendez has in the entryway for stuff. Usually, she'd put her bag in Changeling's room, because that is where they would be hanging out, but tonight their plan is to watch the TV in the living room, so leaving it here is better in that case. This way, it is out of the way so no one will trip, but also close enough that it will not be a pain to reach if Augustus needs something from it before they go to bed.

"Did it hurt?" Changeling asks, holding itself very stiffly as it follows a half-step behind Augustus to go on to sit at the couch.

"No! I was worried it might, because I have never done it before, but I didn't even realize she did it at first. I can *kind of* feel it now? But it is, more in a way of just being *aware* of it; I still don't think it actually hurts any. Did yours hurt?"

Changeling shrugs as it sits down next to her. It does not sit facing the TV, but sideways so that it is facing Augustus, so Augustus twists herself around to mirror and face it too. She gives a curious little wiggle when she sees that it has something in its hands she hadn't noticed before, but Changeling keeps talking before she can find the question to ask about it. "I do not remember," it tells her. "My mom took me when I was a baby."

"*Oh*, that's right," Augustus says, nodding. "My mom did that when Aurora was little, too. Not me, I guess because they

didn't know I would grow up to be a girl," she adds, a little sad. "*But* I got a punch card at the pierce place, so I can get them soon." She is still trying to decide if she will want to get both ears pierced, or just her right one, so that is why she had decided to get her nose pierced first today. "What's that?"

The Changeling tightens its grip, and the thing makes a crinkly paper noise under its fingers. "It is your birthday gift," it says, glancing away off to the side.

Augustus sits up a little straighter. "No way?" she says. She had thought that the plan for the night was her gift already.

It's like this: Augustus does not really like to watch movies — they are long, and she usually gets distracted, and when she is watching she can never figure out when is a good place to take a break, so that makes her get distracted wondering about when *would* be a good place to take a break, until she eventually gets so distracted that she just goes ahead and takes one anyway and then forgets she was in the middle of something and only really realizes she never *finished* the movie until like a week later.

Augustus has always *wanted* to like scary movies, though. She has tried to watch them by herself, and could not get into it the right way on her own, and her dad will not try to watch movies with her anymore because he is fed up with how Augustus wanders off and then comes back to ask questions, so she mostly knows *about* them, but hasn't watched them for herself.

When she had told this to the Changeling, it had said that it would do a movie night for her where *it* would stop all the movies at all the best times it knows, so that Augustus could pretend they were TV show commercial breaks, and that way she could get her wandering distractions out without missing parts of the movie. It said it would also explain all of the details Augustus forgot or didn't understand, because it *loves* to

talk about scary movies, so it could pause when Augustus had questions without being annoyed like other people get. All so that Augustus could *finally* watch scary movies for herself (the best ones, it had assured her, because it knows *all* of the classics and the best Hidden Gems), instead of only hearing about them secondhand.

It was already one of the best gifts Augustus could ever think of. She hadn't thought there would be *more*.

"Do not get your hopes up," Changeling instructs unnecessarily. "There is only one."

Augustus squeals out an excited noise as it leans forward to hand the gift to her. It is a very clumsily taped together crumpled up ball of paper, because the Changeling cannot wrap gifts for shit. Augustus doesn't mind it one bit — Changeling could tell her that the paper ball itself was the present, like how people give cats trash to play with like toys, and Augustus would be happy and excited for it, just because it would be something Changeling had gotten for her.

There *is* something in the middle of the paper, though — Augustus can feel it, a little rigid and heavy on her palm. She picks at the tape until she can peel the whole thing open like an egg, and the little dense thing slips out and into her lap before she can catch it. It takes her a second to find it again, and then once she does and can finally see what it is, she almost feels like she is going to cry.

It is a new carabiner. Augustus holds it in her hand, while her other smacks the heel of her palm against her leg to get out the excitement before something bursts out of her chest. The carabiner is a little bigger than her usual one, and is an entirely new shape and color. The emotions jumble up, huge and yawning, in her chest and stomach until they are almost overwhelming.

Augustus' usual carabiner is shaped like a little black heart. She had wanted to get a pink one, but it was one of the

first things she had bought "as a girl" when she was a teenager, and even the black color had made her hands shake from the nerves of it. It's very old by now, because she has had it for so long, and the little hinge is kind of loose and some of the color has chipped off. She has wondered about replacing it before, but could never figure out if she was any braver than she had been as a teenager, and it was easier to just keep using the same one for forever.

The one that Changeling got for her is brand new, and the hinge works perfect, so Augustus will not have to worry about keys one day slipping off if she moves the wrong way anymore. It is a little bigger than her old one, so she can put even more keys and key-chains on it if she wants to. It is shaped like a little bone, and it is the color pink — bright and perfect and everything Augustus has always wanted.

She moans out an inarticulate excited noise, swiping at her eyes when a few tears slip out. Had she said something about it one day? Or had the Changeling just *known*? The thought of either one makes Augustus' chest feel very hot and full and tight. There is an impulse to slam her head into the Changeling's shoulder, but it would not be a very good Thank You because the Changeling does not like to be touched, so Augustus curbs the desire by tensing up her whole body until it aches, and then relaxing again once it fades. Then she paws excitedly at the old carabiner on her belt loop to get it off, and immediately starts picking keys and key-chains off of it so that she can move them straight over to the new one.

"I love it!" she manages to exclaim finally, thrashing a little more and accidentally dropping the ring with her Sonic key-chain and little mini-library card on it.

Changeling bends to pick it up and give it back to her before Augustus can coordinate her too-stiff limbs to do it herself. "I am glad," it says, and she can tell that it is because

of how fixedly it is watching all her keys find their new places on the bone clip as Augustus moves them all over.

For a moment, Augustus considers putting the old carabiner onto the new one, where it could sit and just be an accessory, and then she gets a much better idea instead. She stands up, and puts the new carabiner on her belt loop and squeals delightedly at the sight of it. All of Augustus' clothes are either very dark or very faded, and the bright pink metal looks so pretty and stark in contrast against it all — it is *perfect*. She stops her foot down hard, and listens to all the rattle and clank of her keys and key-rings as she mess of it smacks against her thigh as the impact jars her ankle all the way up to her hip.

Then she stoops down and clips her old carabiner right on the open belt loop of the Changeling's cargo shorts.

"There!" she says happily. "Now we match!"

It is not a visual matching, perhaps, but it *is* a conceptual one. The black looks very good against the beige of Changeling's shorts, and it used to be Augustus', but more importantly, it is a shape Augustus picked out. This is what makes it a perfect match to how the Changeling had picked *her* out a new one. Augustus does not know if she would have been brave enough to pick a pink color for herself, and she does not know if she would have picked a dog bone shape, but the fact that Changeling had chosen it makes it the most perfect thing in the world. It is a very Changeling shape to pick, and Augustus will think of her friend every time she sees the carabiner from now until forever because of that, and she can't think of anything better.

(It's like this: Augustus has never once in their whole friendship *ever* had to wonder whether Changeling thought she was weird, or bad, or embarrassing. Augustus never feels worried that she is missing pieces when she is with the Changeling, because the Changeling *always* sees her, and it has

never acted like it is disappointed in what it sees, and Augustus does not have the words to express how *much* that makes her feel. She only knows how big she *wants*.)

"It- One does not typically give return gifts on one's birthday," Changeling says stiffly, staring fixedly at the little heart resting against its thigh. Augustus can tell that it is pleased anyway for how it sways — she can picture its tail wagging furiously in her head perfectly. It is also blushing so fiercely that for a moment, Augustus almost gives in to her impulse to kiss it right on the cheek and feel the heat for herself.

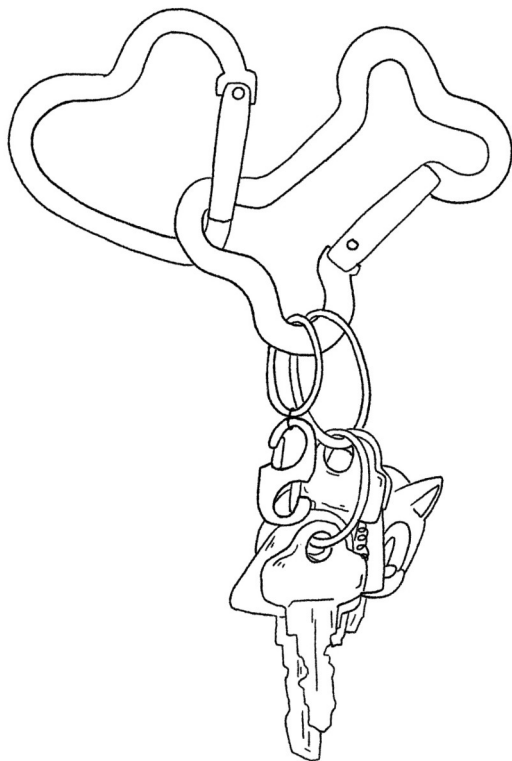
She redirects her energy into throwing herself back down on the couch instead, listening happily to the clatter of her keys, which sounds better to her than it ever has before. Augustus almost does not want to stop looking at the shape of it for even a second, but she shifts her gaze anyway, tilting her head back towards the Changeling and grinning at it as big as she can. "Thank you, Changeling. It is *perfect*."

(She does not have the words for her wanting. Augustus wants to never leave the Changeling's side again for a second. She wants them to be best friends for the entire rest of their lives. She wants to wrap it up in the tightest hug she can manage and never have to let go. She wants the Changeling to lean in and bite her hard enough to leave a mark that won't ever fade, and she wants to actually feel the pain of it. Augustus *wants*.)

The Changeling hooks its fingers into the V of the little black heart on its belt loop, like it wants to feel the pull of it there, and does not look up from the sight of it. "You are welcome," it says softly, and Augustus' heart feels so full she could burst from it.

Augustus thinks about asking if they will start the movies soon, but she hooks her fingers into the corner of the little

pink bone and holds her tongue. She wants to feel the moment of this last for as long as it can.





6. every day I take a minute of your time

So, the good news is that it is not a very busy day.

The bad news is that Augustus is stuck on the register by herself anyway, Rosemary just said that she would be busy with a meeting in her office, and now Augustus cannot get her head to stop jerking to the side.

It's a feeling caught right between the vertebrae at the base of her skull, getting progressively worse with every minute that passes. One of those things where, *maybe* there is a way to see it coming, but Augustus is never tuned into her body well enough to figure out how. She never really notices anything until it's suddenly very urgently upon her — not hunger, nor thirst, nor headaches, nor nausea, nor needing to go to the bathroom, so unfortunately, she figures that tic attacks are kind of out of the questions. She can only *maybe* look back and remember that she had been ticcing worse than usual on her drive that morning, but often that doesn't mean anything at all, and even if it did, so many of her tics fade into the background anyway that it is difficult to keep track of them in any meaningful way.

Less difficult at times like these, though. Her head jerks to the side again — once, twice, three times. It has been happening with increasing frequency for several minutes now, and she fears the insistence will soon reach its peak — overreaching from a "bad tic day" into a "Full Blown Tic

Attack". Already, her whole face is caught in the contraction of a blink that will not stop, her neck has begun to ache with the repetitive strain, the movement growing so intense that her shoulder has begun hitching up to collide with her jaw.

Worse, Augustus *cannot* make herself stop sniffing, and it has begun to make her feel as if she is hyperventilating.

Annoyed, Augustus fumbles for the talk button on her walkie-talkie's headset. "Hey, Changeling," she manages to grit out, hurriedly letting go of the wire when her head jerks again and nearly pulls her ear out of its little cuff entirely. She grunts at the force of it, breath hitching uncomfortably through several compulsive sniffs.

"What?" the Changeling's voice crackles back. It is difficult to decipher whether the growled edge to the word she hears is because of the static or because it is annoyed. It could be either; Changeling's shift today has been largely dedicated to sorting through the entire vault to collect all the damaged bills so they can be sent to the bank and finally stop jamming the bill-counter machine when they inevitably tear in half — a task that Changeling is rather fond of. *So*, the interruption has most definitely annoyed it, Augustus decides.

Well, that sucks, but so does this. "Can you come out to the register?" Augustus manages to ask. "I'm-," her vocal chords seize up in her throat as she wrenches her head back, eyes squeezed shut against the electric agony building up in her cheeks and spine. She fumbles her hand blindly up to her face to hold her glasses in place so they will not fall, expression caught in a wince so severe that all her eyelid muscles *burt*, but still it is not enough to meet the minimum threshold her misfiring brain is attempting to demand of her.

It is bad already, but she knows from experience that it will continue to get worse. The goalpost is shifting further back every time Augustus gets close to fulfilling the insistent need to *move*. Her head snaps back hard enough to ache a little,

muscles in her neck yanking sharp against nothing at all, leaving her a little dizzy. Her breath catches uncomfortably in her sinuses.

Augustus slams the heel of her palm against the side of her head. That one is *not* a tic — just a rather futile effort to knock loose some of the tension coiling tightly around her vertebrae, to make it pass, to convince it to let her pull in a full breath, or at least hold off just long enough for the Changeling to make it up here and take over the register. She can't remember if there were any customers on the floor, but she feels a flash of anxiety about someone else seeing anyway. It doesn't even especially work, except to make her temple throb with the impact, but at least the pain is something tangible to focus on, to anchor herself with and stave off the attack just a few moments longer.

A distressed noise catches high up in the back of Augustus' throat. She is having a *truly* terrible time.

"Okay," comes Changeling's voice, no longer on the radio. "This is a tic attack," it adds, in a voice that is a statement but also kind of a question.

"Yeah," Augustus manages to reply, head jerking painfully to the side, chin butting against her shoulder again. This is important, because the Changeling does not have tics, but it does have seizures every once in a while, and sometimes those look like just its arm jerking to the side in a way that is almost like a tic. It gets unsettled sometimes, when it feels unsure if Augustus is really ticcing or not.

"Okay," it repeats, seeming more settled, even though its tone is as flat as always. "I suppose I will watch the register, then."

Despite the fact that she had called it to the front to do exactly that, Augustus distantly feels a little bad for it. Changeling is truly terrible at working in the front — even when it *tries* to smile it can never really pull it off, and it works

very deliberately in a way that customers find slow, and it usually needs to yield any questions to someone else immediately because it never knows the answers — which is why it's usually exclusively in the accounting office during its shifts, except for the moments like these when there are no other options.

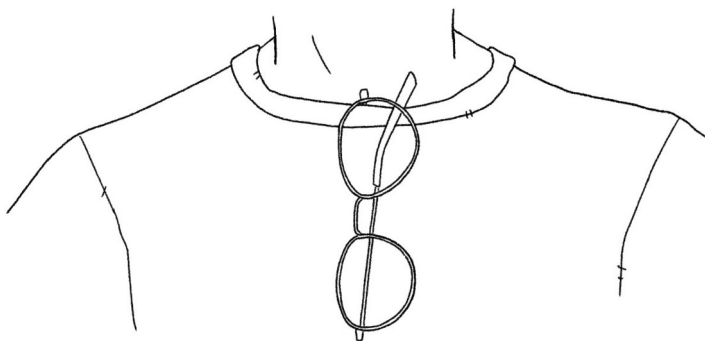
Augustus tries to figure out how to apologize, but the words get lost somewhere between the increasing anxiety in her brain and the uncomfortable spasms of her muscles. Usually, when she has an attack at work, she leaves to go wait it out in the back since there's supposed to be a second person on the floor, but he had called out sick today, and now Augustus fears that it might be too late to leave. The dizziness is steadily worsening, and she can't see all that well through the incessant blinking, and it becomes difficult to walk straight when her neck is ticcing this badly. Changeling could try to help her walk, but that would necessitate they leave the front of the store unattended, which they are not supposed to do for any period of time.

She cannot determine the correct course of action. Like it wants just to complicate things further, Augustus' head jerks to the side forcefully enough to jar her glasses halfway off her face.

"I'll fall," she realizes she's saying; between her uncontrollably hitching breath and general lack of concentration, the words are nigh unintelligible. She tries to fix her glasses but can't keep still well enough to orient her hand to the correct position to do so. Augustus can be rather clumsy at the best of times, and a tic-induced inability to establish equilibrium is *not* the best of times. There is no way she will be able to make it to the back of the store like this. "I'll fall."

Frustratingly, she feels the overwhelming urge to cry rising up the back of her throat. There's just *too much*.

"Okay," Changeling repeats, somewhere between brusque and calm. She feels it step forward and snag the arm of her glasses that had fallen entirely out from behind her ear, pulling them off all the way and out of the risk of being thrown to the side. In the brief glances of the world Augustus can see through the frantic blinking, she sees Changeling hook them on the collar of its shirt where they will not get lost.



"I'll- *bbck*," Augustus' voice catches in her throat, her head craned so sharply to the right that her spine aches with it. Despite her best efforts, she feels a few tears drip down her face — the sensation hot and crawling against her skin — and that makes everything worse. She does not mind her tics usually, but when they are this bad they are not *usual*. She does not want people to stare at her, and the fact that she is getting emotional about it only makes everything harder than it already is. She wants to be at home, or even in the back, or at least anywhere *except* in full view of the whole entire store. She can't even get her eyes all the way open to check and make sure no one is staring at her (or worse, *filming*).

"Come on," Changeling says sternly, reminding her all at once that it is right there. "Just sit down." It steps in closer to place its hands beneath Augustus' elbows, pulling a little to encourage her to brace her weight against it. For once, Augustus is relieved to be so much taller than Changeling when her head jerks in such a way that *definitely* would have hit it had they been of similar heights. "If you are on the floor, no one will see you."

Obediently, Augustus braces her weight against the Changeling's grip and staggers unsteadily to the ground with its help, just to promptly slam her head backwards into the shelf under the register. She hears herself make a choked little noise at the impact.

"Shoot," Changeling swears. "Not that way, idiot."

It leans in just close enough to haul Augustus back and sideways, so that the backwards snap of her head will not make contact with anything but the side of the Changeling's thigh. Her breath hitches in the back of her sinuses again, head snapping to the side; her face hurts. It is the *worst*.

The inability to draw a full breath has begun to make Augustus feel sick to her stomach, and the unsteady spasms of muscles around her throat only serves to make the sensation more intense. She digs her heels into the ground and tries to focus on the deliberate pressure of her legs pushing into the resistance. She tries not to lean too hard against the Changeling and does her best to muffle the noise she's making. Hiding behind the counter was a good idea, but it will only help so much if she fails to get the ugly sounds of herself ticcing through tears under control.

She can't tell if she is doing a good enough job, though, and the panic threatens to wrench itself even higher at the thought. Augustus is used to ticcing — even when it gets this bad, she is familiar enough to not be caught *excessively* off-guard — but it is difficult to apply logic to a panic as

hindbrain as this one. It does not matter how firmly Augustus reminds herself that this will pass as it always does, it is not enough to convince her body to cease screaming about how she cannot breathe, cannot speak, cannot *move*. In the back of her head, Augustus imagines a dog with its leg caught in a bear trap, frantic and bleeding, and feels a miserable noise catch in the folds of her vocal chords.

"Breathe," Changeling reminds her, and Augustus' face twists painfully tight with the effort of heaving in a thin, useless breath. Her shoulder hitches up as if in a shrug, and smacks against the underside of her jaw hard enough to make her teeth clack uncomfortably against each other. Her hand flails back blindly and lands on the Changeling's boot, and Augustus digs her fingers in around the leather and bears her weight down in a desperate attempt to ground herself to *something*. If this attack unfolds into a full blown meltdown because she could not calm down, that will be *bad*, so she has to try her best to hold it together.

In her head, she imagines reaching up and catching the Changeling's hand in hers instead, holding on tight and feeling it hold her back. The notion is so tantalizing that her mouth opens to ask "*Can I hold your hand?*" (or paw, sometimes the Changeling calls its hands its "paws", and it is one of many cute things about it that Augustus can never point out because she will embarrass it so terribly that it will make her leave and refuse to answer her texts), but the words don't make it to her mouth at all. She doesn't have the air to speak, and cares too much about its permission to try to just reach up and grab it without warning.

Instead, she lets her nails drag against the rounded ridges of its boot laces and forces her lungs to pull in another breath against the crawling *need* to sniff skulking around in her nose. She doesn't *have* to hold its hand, even if it would maybe be nice; it is enough that the Changeling is here at all. Augustus is

almost always alone during attacks like this, and usually she prefers it that way, she thinks. But unlike usual, Augustus is caught out in the middle of public instead of already hidden away somewhere else. If she *was* by herself here, she wouldn't be able to help any customers, or keep them from staring at her, or tell them to stop it or go away if they tried to reach out and "help" her — it is all very upsetting to think about.

So Augustus stops thinking about it and focuses on the line of sensation where her spine leans against the Changeling's leg instead, and that is alright to do because she *is not* stuck up here all by herself. Changeling is here with her, there to take care of things while Augustus is indisposed. She doesn't have to be worried, because Changeling can work the register if any customers do show up, and it will tell people to stop it if they try to stare at her, and it would not let anyone get close or take a video on their phone or try to touch or talk to her, and that is a relief.

Her head wrenches back and collides with the Changeling's knee, and it does not buckle beneath the impact. Inside her head, Augustus imagines a dog standing guard, eyes big and staring, ears pricked forward attentively, with one of those big, spiked collars that keep predators from going for its throat. Another noise chokes in the back of her throat, and she feels the Changeling widen its stance to brace them both better against the continued torrent of movement.

It will be okay, Augustus reminds herself against the way her head gets caught in an uncomfortable constricting side twist. Changeling is here, and it will be fine, and if anything goes wrong, the Changeling will be able to handle it. It will not tolerate anyone else staring at her.

(The Changeling itself is, of course, almost certainly looking at her. It does that a lot — either little glances like it's checking to make sure she is still there, or even staring outright, just because. It is okay if it is Changeling staring at

her, though; Augustus likes Changeling, ergo she likes it when the Changeling stares at her.)

The tension that has had her spine in a vice grip loosens, *just* a little. Her head jerks to the side — once, twice, three times — and she feels it slowly begin to unravel. When Augustus finally manages to heave in an unsteady breath through her mouth, the sharp insistence of it unlocks and falls away completely. This time, it actually stays gone.

Augustus lets out the breath that has been stuck agonizingly in her sinuses as a deep, groaning sigh, stretching her neck out to the left and digging her knuckles into the sore parts of her cheeks and forehead. It doesn't feel like she pulled any muscles this time, thankfully, which is nearly as much of a relief as finally getting to wipe away the sticky trails of tears on her face is. She scrubs out the few drops that had gotten stuck in her eyelashes and lets her weight settle a little more firmly against the Changeling's legs, since it has already proven itself capable of standing firm against it.

She should get up, probably. Changeling makes a very good guardian dog, but it really is awful at working the register and it's kind of a miracle no customers have shown up to antagonize it yet. Plus, it probably has got ants in its pants about going back to finish its actual job in the vault already. She *should* get up, but Augustus lets herself hesitate just a little bit longer. *Just until I catch my breath*, she tells herself, and moves her hand off the Changeling's boot to lay it flat on her chest to count out a better breathing rhythm so that she doesn't accidentally make herself hyperventilate in the other direction.

It was almost a very close call; she knows if she rushes herself too much, that just leaves her vulnerable to having another meltdown later on, which she does not think she can risk with time still left in her shift. Changeling is blunt enough to let her know if she is taking too long. Until then, she can let

herself focus on just recovering, and let it take watch just a little while longer.

It is maybe a couple minutes later when the Changeling finally clears its throat above her, the muscles in its legs bunching awkwardly like it is restraining itself from shuffling its feet. Augustus leans forward so that they are no longer touching, and then clumsily shifts up onto her knees so that she can stand up without falling over.

Her head shakes again when she gets back on her feet, but the tic passes like normal this time. Changeling waits for Augustus to regain her bearings, and then offers her glasses back, frames balances delicately in the flat of its palm.

"Thank you, Changeling," Augustus tells it, voice soft. She's still a little too tired to shape the syllables the way she's supposed to, but at least she hadn't lost speech entirely this time.

"There are 46 minutes until the store closes," it replies, its gaze fixed somewhere above her head. When it shifts its stance uncertainly, its tail shifts too — it looks a little bit like it's wagging.

Augustus nods, and it turns into the arc of a tic on the upswing. "Got it. Have fun sorting the rest of the vault," she says, and Changeling nods back and promptly scampers off, almost as if it was waiting for permission to go.

It probably was, Augustus thinks, smiling a little to herself as she turns to log back into the register. If she had still needed it to stay with her at the front a little longer — because she was still regaining her footing, or her words, or even just because she was still a little nervous and *wanted* it to stay — it would have, even though it was impatient to get back to its other job too, because Changeling is a very good friend like that. It is always more helpful and considerate than other people give it credit for.

Never again does Augustus want to be forced to suffer through a tic attack while stuck in full view of the whole entire store, but regardless of where the next attack occurs, Augustus feels certain that she will want Changeling there to guard her through the worst of it. There is no one she trusts more than it, after all.



7. it's the only ease that comforts me

Augustus hides herself small in the mess of blankets she has shoved behind her couch and tries her best not to move.

Her Sunday has not been going as well as she had hoped it would. They rarely do, it feels like — Sunday's are always hard, and Augustus rarely knows what to do about it. It is the day of the week that *should* be the easiest, but that often only loops around to becoming the hardest. She does not always know how to make it make sense; it does not feel very fair.

Yesterday had been okay, had been *good*, even. She had done her grocery shopping first thing like she always does on Saturdays, and it had gone well. She had gotten everything on her list, and not forgotten anything, *and* had managed to avoid getting so anxious and exhausted that she had to go straight back to bed when she got home, which usually happens quite a lot.

Instead, it had been just a tolerable amount of exhausting that had been easily negated by unexpected excitement. The median on one of the roads she drives on had bloomed a variety of good grasses that hadn't been there the week before, and a perfect spot at a red light meant that Augustus had gotten the opportunity to recognize several different species before she had to drive on. She had come home and — after she'd made herself pause to put all her groceries away — had immediately gone to go through her field guides to double check her mental classifications and then got a lot of

good reading and drawing done on the topic during the whole rest of the day.

She had been hopeful that today would be more of the same. Time had gotten away from her yesterday, and so she had been in the middle of a page in her grass journal when she had realized it was much later than she usually goes to bed, so she had let herself leave the task half-finished with plans to finish it today. It had seemed like the best idea at the time.

Instead, Augustus had woken up later than she'd meant to, and even once she had finally gotten to make herself get out of the bed, she'd just gone to sit at her desk and could not figure out how to make herself do anything at all. She'd just stared at the page, feeling inexplicably exhausted past words, and could not bring herself to even pick up her pen. Her hands felt too clumsy and uncertain to do anything — she'd known without even having to try that she would only mess everything up if she'd tried to finish the sketching or the notes or anything at all.

Eventually, she had at least been able to convince her hands to start flipping through books and pages, trying to find the spark that had made yesterday so exciting, but it would not work. Instead of vibrant and interesting, all of the words and illustrations felt gray and tasteless in her throat, and the more she tried to make everything connect the way she'd wanted it to, the more upset she'd felt herself getting.

A restless glance at the clock told her she should be eating lunch, so she had decided to just give up and put everything away. Except once she'd realized that meant she had to actually start the new task of deciding what to eat, and then going to make it, and then actually eating it, everything had stalled out even *worse* than it had with her notebooks.

Augustus is supposed to eat on a timed schedule because she very often cannot recognize that she is feeling hungry

until several hours *after* the feeling has already started. Today, though, she had felt so not-hungry that the idea of eating at all had just made her feel sick, so even though she had *just* gone shopping, she could not think of anything that she could stomach eating. Still, because she is *supposed* to eat, even when she does not "feel hungry", she had kept trying to come up with *something*.

At least, until she had realized that the whole process had stressed her out so terribly that at some point, she had begun to cry. *A five*, she'd thought, pressing the palms of her hands as hard as she could into the flat surface of her desk so that she did not hit herself with them, *I am at a five*. So then Augustus had stood up and given up on everything entirely.

Hence, the hiding.

Augustus had shoved the couch away from the wall just enough to fit herself behind it, and put on her ear defenders against the hum of the AC unit and the faint noise of her dad watching TV upstairs, and gathered all of her blankets up to tuck them behind the couch and burrow down inside of them just to make herself as small, and quiet, and hidden as she could manage.

A memory of a teacher's voice nags in the back of her head that hiding will not fix anything at all. All of the tasks and problems will still be there, unfinished, whenever she manages to emerge, she *knows* it. Augustus does her best to shove the annoying insistence away; she *knows* she isn't fixing anything, but she feels less like she is liable to crumble and meltdown entirely while she is here. She has never been very good at packing up the emotions when they are cold and encompassing and exhausting like this. The hiding solves nothing, maybe, but at least it helps with *that*.

So Augustus ignores the voice and does not get up. When the fabric of her flannel shirt begins to catch and pull uncomfortably against the fabric of her blankets, she very

briefly moves everything to take the offending shirt off and add it to the side of her little nest, but that is it. The world feels less like it is shaking and suffocating her under here; it feels easier to breathe when she is in the dark like this. At least enough that Augustus is able to stop crying, and just lay there in the quiet instead.

Not all of the feelings go away, though. They are not so sharp as to be *hurting* her anymore, but she still feels them. Distant and tired and heavy and *sad*, and not quite sure why. Augustus presses her face into the mound of fabrics and sighs out a very heavy breath. The tears well up again and then fade back into the grayness of it all without spilling over.

A small, crying part of Augustus wants someone to come and help her somehow. The bigger, older parts of her cannot think of anything anyone could do anyway, and knows that there is no point. The wanting feeling does not go away with this logic, however — it just feels sadder. Augustus huffs and rolls over onto her stomach with her arms all folded up underneath herself to let them feel all the pressure and weight she can get. Not quite a hug, but basically good enough.

She agrees with the small feeling in on this: she does not want to have to get up. She does not want to have to get out of the soft and dark of the blankets, does not want to decide what to eat, nor figure out how to make it, nor have to actually eat it. She does not want to have to do it all over again for dinner, nor go take a shower, *nor* have to go to work tomorrow. Augustus just wants to lay here, warm and quiet, and never have to get up again — just burrow down, and enter diapause, and not re-emerge until the world decides to be less overwhelming.

That will not happen, of course, because Augustus is a human and not a bug, but at least she can pretend. She burrows down deeper into the blankets and imagines it is dirt, and leans into the heavy and far-away feelings in her body and

thinks of the sensation as a lowering metabolism, and then imagines a layer of frost freezing on top of the blankets, and stops thinking of anything at all.

Eventually, she is pushed back into waking up a little when her phone buzzes in her pocket. Augustus fumbles her ear defenders off when she realizes the band has started making the top of her head hurt, and then misses them a little once they are gone. She buries herself back under the blankets to compensate, and then remembers to pull out her phone and blink blearily at the screen. Things don't feel as awful as they had earlier, but she still feels too heavy and sad to want to get up, even if she can actually feel that she is hungry now.

The text is from the Changeling: *'Do you want come to my house today?'*

Augustus hums out a mournful sound and hides her face again. Going to the Changeling's house would be nice, it *always* makes her feel better when she goes, but there are too many steps today. She cannot be sure she can even make herself come out from under the blankets without bursting into overwhelmed tears all over again — there is no hope that she could make it upstairs, and into her car, and then drive safely all the way to its house, and knock on its door, and maybe have to talk to its *mom* on her way in. Augustus does not think she can do it no matter how much she wants to.

She makes a new whining sound about it, and then unlocks her phone to answer it before Changeling can start to worry. She cannot think of any words in her head at all, let alone find ones that could help explain things, so she switches to the emoji keyboard instead and sends back an '❌' as her answer.

'You okay?' Changeling writes back.

'❌ 🙄', she replies.

'Can I help?'

Can it? she wonders. Augustus would like it if the answer could be yes, but there are no problems on her plate that it could solve. Changeling cannot convince her brain to let her want to eat, or make tomorrow not come, or at least make tomorrow not be a workday. It cannot get rid of these feelings so that Augustus will not be so weighed down by them.

She is stuck there in that hopeless little loop for a while, and then finally remembers that "helping" does not always have to mean exactly "fixing".

Augustus digs around for the words, and then taps on the Changeling's icon and calls it instead of having to move to text it back. It answers on the second ring with a careful, "Yes?", far enough from the microphone that Augustus can tell it has her on speakerphone.

She does the same while her brain and mouth fight each other to get the words out. "Can you just talk?" she manages softly.

Changeling is quiet a moment. "I read a new book this week," it says finally. There is a heavy thinking sound of the phone being put down somewhere, and then it continues, "It contained an essay about Margery Kempe. She is the woman who began weeping after her conversion, and did not stop until she died decades later. For the first several years, she did this out of contrition for her sins, and then she did a pilgrimage. When she was in Rome, she had a vision of Saint Jerome, where he told her she had been 'blessed' with a 'well of tears', and then in Jerusalem, had a vision of the crucifixion so intense that she says she progressed from 'weeping' to 'roaring'."

Its voice is steady as it continues on, and Augustus presses her face into the soft fabrics of her blankets, and listens.

It does not fix anything at all, but it helps.





8. and the words have fallen

"Do you ever wish you knew Spanish?" Augustus asks unceremoniously one evening. "Like, enough to speak it?"

The Changeling tilts its head and doesn't answer straight away. Augustus isn't bothered by the delay, she just keeps on sorting her Bakugan cards, and doesn't try looking up to stare back at it while she waits.

"Sometimes, I suppose," Changeling says finally. It turns its head away to continue speaking, and Augustus can see its hands flexing uncertainly in its lap as it weighs its words. "I believe my mother had... Expected me to learn. But she was told it would be expecting too much. So she was told to cease speaking the language around me altogether. I learned more ASL than I ever did Spanish. M-,"

It cuts the noise off in its throat. Augustus does not speak up yet. Sometimes, she messes up the tones when she speaks, and she ends a sentence accidentally sounding like she's still in the middle of saying something, so people will wait even though there is nothing to wait for. The Changeling is not like this, Augustus has learned, and it gets annoyed to be spoken over. Generally, it's easier to wait unnecessarily than the opposite, especially when Augustus is a little embarrassed bringing up the topic at all.

"I do not know if it is true, that it would have confused me. But, yes," it concludes. "Occasionally I do wish I had been given the choice."

It doesn't ask outright for her answer, but Augustus opens her mouth anyway — they always do *quid pro quo*. "My mom used Spanish a lot, when she was around," she says, shuffling the cards to keep her hands busy. "Not, like, whole sentences, but she would use a bunch of Spanish words still even when she spoke English mostly. I remember some of it, but, I think she'd stopped speaking full Spanish even before I was born. I think about this sometimes," she admits.

"Because my great-grandma did not speak any English at all, you know?" she explains. Augustus does not always remember things right, but she remembers that house very well. The scratchy texture of the carpet on her knees, and the smell of stuff always being cooked in the kitchen, and the way her great-grandma would chatter at her, and how sometimes someone else would interrupt and say in English what she had said, but even then she hadn't really seemed to expect Augustus to speak back, and Augustus remembers feeling relieved by this. She also remembers there were Our Lady statuettes everywhere — sometimes being in Changeling's room makes her nostalgic for it. Augustus thinks maybe they could have liked each other, her great-grandma and the Changeling, and then realizes she's being distracted.

"Anyway," she continues, trying to reign herself in. She has a point, she thinks, but she feels strangely shy about getting to it. She does not usually talk about this a lot. she does not think her dad would understand it, really. "My grandparents always spoke both fluent. But my mom didn't speak it much at all; I think I remember someone telling the story that my grandparents made her stop speaking it when she was a little kid, even though she was fluent in both, so she would not keep an accent. So she would blend in more."

It had worked for her mom, but not so much for Augustus. Not that Augustus has a Spanish accent like her grandparents had. An Autism one, maybe, though. Everyone had tried really hard to teach her to "overcome" it too, but even though Augustus can speak clearer than she could when she was a kid, it isn't anywhere close to being *gone*. Her speech therapists would all be disappointed, probably, to know that her current voice is just as good as it gets. Secretly in her head, though, Augustus thinks she's pleased by this. She likes her voice — errant W's and strange pacing and poor intonation and all.

"But I think she wished she spoke it more. I wish I spoke it more." She realizes that she has been picking at the frayed edge of a Gate Card, peeling the layers apart, and hastens to stop before she pulls it apart entirely. "I think I missed my window, though."

Augustus digs Altair out of her pocket and rolls it onto the card so that it pops open, so that she can play with all of its hinged pieces instead of ruining the card.



"Like, people say I should learn it on my own," this is something of a lie, sort of. Augustus has never spoken to anyone about this before, but she suspects that if she *did* talk about it, that is what people would tell her. "But I do not learn things well. And my mom is not around anymore to speak Spanish to anyway. So it feels fake. I have lived with my dad longer than I ever did my mom. It's," she hesitates again, tilting her head away from the Changeling so she does not have to see it react to what she says. "I am darker than you, but I always feel like it doesn't-

like I don't count. It doesn't feel right. Like it might have. If she hadn't left. If they had not made her stop speaking Spanish."

Augustus clicks the Bakugan back into its ball shape. "Sorry," she says reflexively, flushing a little. "That's dumb."

"It is not," Changeling counters promptly. When she glances up, Augustus finds it is staring at her shoulder very intently. "It is not stupid."

Its jaw is so *tense*, Augustus thinks, and then feels something very fond grow warm in her chest when she realizes that it's because it is trying to look for words to be reassuring to her. It is better at being matter of fact than comforting, but it is trying, and Augustus wants to smile and bite it and run away and do none of that at all at the same time. She squashes down the feeling until it is strange and fluttery in her stomach and not anywhere else in her body anymore.

"You count," Changeling settles on saying. "Even if you were paler than me, you would still be Mexican. That is how it works." It hesitates again, and then, "My mom would speak Spanish with you, if you asked her to teach you."

Never in one billion years will Augustus have the confidence to broach this topic with Mrs. Mendez, Augustus thinks, laughing a little in her head about it. But she can tell that the Changeling means it, and that is more than nice enough on its own.

The biting feeling comes back so strong that Augustus' teeth ache with it.

"Thanks, Changeling," she says, and the words are clipped more than they should be, and her tongue catches awkwardly on the consonants, and the tone is more nasal than people say it should be.

Secretly in her head, Augustus thinks at least that is something nice, too.



9. lazy and lying on your belly

Changeling has spent the better part of three hours watching Yu-Gi-Oh on its phone, laying half splayed out against its headboard. It is still over the covers because that means it is not "going to bed" yet, which means that it does not have to take its headband off yet. The room is quiet, aside from the tinny sound of the duel race and the light sound of the little piercings its mom had helped put into its furry ears, rattling every time Changeling shifts its head.

They jangle louder when the unexpectedly abrupt opening of the door startles the Changeling so bad it nearly drops the phone on its face.

Augustus — the culprit — barely reacts to the fierce scowl Changeling sends her way. She does not even bother speaking in her defense, instead tossing herself to lay face down in the empty side of Changeling's bed with enough force to send it sliding down the headboard a few inches further.

"Did you walk into the house without knocking?" Changeling asks, torn equally between incredulous and annoyed, but not enough to actually bother pausing its show to ask. Its mother had left for work a few episodes ago, it recalls — she had stopped by its room to say goodbye. "Was the door *unlocked*?" it demands, something sharp and alarmed pricking at its lungs.

"Your mom said I could," Augustus replies before the panic can hook itself in too deeply. "She told me where she hides the spare key."

Well, that is its own kind of alarming — they should not have a spare key hidden out in the open at all. That is how stupid burglaries happen. If its mother had wanted to give Augustus access to the house, she could have simply given the copy to her. That would have been safer — Augustus never misplaces keys, she keeps them all clipped to her belt.

(It does make sense that Augustus should have her own key by now; she comes over often enough to more than earn the use of one. Changeling should have thought of it before itself, but she really *should* just take the key instead of having to routinely retrieve it from a hiding place, which would make itself fairly obvious to neighbors and passersby after a while. It makes a mental note to put the key on her carabiner as soon as possible.)

"Fine," it says stiffly, shifting back up a little. Augustus does not respond, not even to move. She just lays there, face tucked against one of the Changeling's pillows, her breaths big and sighing in the quiet. Changeling grits its teeth, reaching up to rub the corner of an ear between its knuckles, fingers smoothing over the fur, considering. The silence is atypical; its chest feels taut and heavy (frustrated?) and it is not certain why. "What is wrong with you?" it blurts out, dropping its hand to yank on one of its human earlobes instead.

"Gimme ten," is Augustus' nonsensical reply.

Changeling blinks down at the back of her head. Yusei rattles off the name of a card in its phone speakers.

"Minutes?" it clarifies confusedly, and Augustus grunts. Which is only *probably* a yes, but it is annoyed enough that the onus to re-clarify should that not be the case is now on *her* shoulders, not its own. So Changeling skips back a few minutes to the beginning of the race where it had stopped

paying attention, occasionally tapping the screen to show the time purely to satisfy its own curiosity.

Throughout, Augustus remains disengaged dead weight at its side, her presence marked solely by the slow leech of her body heat into the Changeling's hip where her arm presses against it. The Changeling considers moving to distance itself from the touch, as it typically would, but finds itself refraining for now — the discomfort that usually drives the impulse does not seem to be settling in. It wonders if perhaps it is just too distracted to be bothered, for once.

"What is wrong with you?" it repeats, precisely ten minutes later, actually pausing the show this time so it will not have to rewind again.

This time, Augustus turns her face out of the pillow to squint up at Changeling directly. She is not wearing her glasses, it realizes, and it makes her face look strange and unfamiliar. Changeling glances away. "You know how the bookstore had those two lights by the register that have been burned out for forever?" Even free from the confines of the pillow, her words come out slow and tense — as if she is concentrating harder than usual to get them out of her mouth. She is more likely to sound like this during or after long shifts than she is before them.

"Yes," Changeling replies, abruptly annoyed by her second nonsensical response to its relatively straightforward question, but restraining itself from saying so valiantly. Augustus is more loquacious than Changeling is; she will almost always use more words than less, even when she could save time and effort by simply answering questions directly rather than always proliferating and clarifying things.

"Well," she says. "Rosemary finally got someone to replace them, which was an *anful* surprise. They even went so far as to replace them with flor-four," she huffs. "Fluorescents," she manages, forcing each syllable out

individually. "This in combination with the windows there, it has become *far* too bright. And loud. I can hear them even over the dumb music. And they are not even the same *color* as the other lights on the floor. It looks dumb, and I have suffered the last several hours with a terrible ache in the backs of my eyes for it."

This is why Changeling never leaves the house without sunglasses on. It does not point this out this time. "Shoot," it swears sympathetically instead. Then idly adds, "Just like the Ark of the Covenant," when the image of the bright, face-melting light flashes in the back of its head for a heartbeat.

Augustus squints her eyes back open just to glare sullenly up at it. The sight inexplicably makes the Changeling's hands clench around its phone hard enough to inadvertently turn off the screen entirely. "I don't watch movies," she reminds it petulantly.

"You understood the reference fine, idiot," Changeling replies tartly, deliberately stretching out its fingers and attempting to rub away a sudden tightness in its chest.

"I did not," Augustus argues back.

Before the Changeling can counter that she had clearly recognized it enough to know it was a reference to a movie specifically, Augustus abruptly hauls herself up onto her elbows. Changeling freezes, unsure if she will need it to move so that she can get off the bed, and is instead pinned in place when Augustus moves only to lay back down with her head placed squarely in the center of the Changeling's chest.

Beneath her, the Changeling goes stiff.

"You're warm," Augustus mumbles, half to herself, shuffling the rest of her body in closer to pin her arms down under the weight of her own chest, body pressed up against Changeling's side. It freezes, hands hovering uncertainly above her shoulders, unsure of what to do with itself. Usually, it would have shoved her off immediately. Usually, she would

have asked before she touched it at all. She used to forget to do this frequently, but has not done so in a while. *Do I hate this?* Changeling wonders anxiously, and has no answer for itself.

Oblivious, Augustus finishes curling her body around the Changeling's side and sniffs pathetically. Instead of asking for either forgiveness or permission for the breach in etiquette, she says, "Your lamp is too bright."

The words 'Fix it yourself' rise up on impulse and lock uncomfortably in the Changeling's throat. The light is one of the dimmest bulbs available — all of Changeling's lights are — but perhaps Augustus' headache is worse than she let on. This thought is enough to halt its urge to extricate itself as quickly as possible in its metaphorical tracks. It deliberates on its own memories of past postictal headaches — white hot railroad spikes of pain radiating all the way down its neck. Does it hate this? If it pushed her away, the probability is high that Augustus would not react in anger, but in passive acceptance of the Changeling's boundaries as she has always done in the past, but does it need her to stop touching it? Does it want her to get off?

For once, it is not so sure of the answer.

Cautiously, the Changeling reaches up to turn off the lamp, bracing itself for the movement to push the contact into something soured and awful, but finding that the moment does not seem to be arriving. Is this *comfortable*? Augustus does not seem to be complaining either, her weight settling in more firmly against its chest when the room goes dark around them. It waits to feel unsettled and realizes that it is still waiting and not actually feeling anything.

Do I like this? it wonders, baffled. It cannot determine this either. The weight of Augustus' body on its own feels overwhelming and mildly claustrophobic, but not quite smothering. It decides it feels mostly confused, and that it is

not panicking. She usually asks, it thinks again. Had she just forgotten? Does her head hurt her that badly?

Changeling's brain provides it with an image of a wolf cub curled up, asleep, on the back of a beleaguered looking adult. It does not clarify much.

Augustus takes the opportunity to shuffle closer, tucking her face more efficiently into the meat of Changeling's shoulder, letting out a sigh that makes it shiver. It grits its teeth — *that* sensation was decidedly more unpleasant, air ghosting too lightly over the hairs on its arm beneath the edge of its shirt sleeve, raising irritated goosebumps; but at least it has a baseline now. It decides that this touching is indeed tolerable, but the tolerance is limited. For now, it resolves mainly not to think about it, and cautiously settles one of its arms against the flat plane of Augustus' back in order for it to still be able to see its show over her shoulder. When Augustus does not protest the additional contact, it clumsily turns its show back on with its one free hand to distract itself before it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Despite its fixed attention on the duel race, Changeling can feel it when Augustus goes from listening along to the show to sleeping — her weight on its chest growing warmer and more dense. Something hot suffuses Changeling's chest at the realization, flooding its mouth with saliva. It focuses doggedly on Yusei's next turn instead of dwelling on this, refusing to give into the impulse to turn its head to stare. Once again, it debates the merits of extricating itself from under her, and once again finds itself refraining.

Do I like this? It glances sidelong at the back of her head. It cannot see her face for how she has it hidden, and thinks it finds this disappointing for a reason it cannot decipher.

Something in its jaw aches fiercely with an impulse it does not understand. When it realizes belatedly that its phone has gone silent, it attempts to refocus itself once again —

picking the device back up and turning it on to start the next episode.

The arms of its headband digs uncomfortably against the shell of its human ears, splitting its attention once again from the episode recap. The thought of taking the headband off now feels like a concession of some sort, an inexplicable hot flash of embarrassment in some admission. The Changeling pointedly leaves the dog ears exactly where they are, merely readjusting them instead. Privately, it wishes it understood whatever unspoken thing its body seems to know that it does not.

Typically, it might deign to ask Augustus for clarity on the matter. Somehow, it understands enough to know that it will not do so this time.

Atop its chest, Augustus sleeps on, oblivious to it all.

The Changeling makes it through several episodes in this manner: welding its thoughts to the dialogue of the show in order to avoid thinking about the way it has begun to sweat, how this discomfort is stabilized by the rhythmic pattern of Augustus' breath beneath the noise of the show, the way the shifting of their rib-cages has fallen into a comfortable synchronicity, the way her unconscious presence continues to conjure images of wolves baring their throats in its mind.

The longer Changeling dwells on it, though, the more intense the sensory input becomes. It feels hyper-aware of its palm against Augustus' back, the way the fabric of its shirt has creased between their bodies, of its tongue in its mouth.

Beneath its increasingly conflicted discomfort, however, some part of Changeling is able to acknowledge that there is something satisfying in the situation. Something that feels heavy and important in having Augustus here, in its inner sanctum, where Changeling can watch over her and ensure her safety from the many threats of the outside world. Something heady in the knowledge that Augustus had come here, to

Changeling's house, instead of her own. That she had chosen to seek comfort in Changeling, before anyone else. She trusts *Changeling* to be both over and beneath her while she is hurt, and asleep. The thought makes its jaw ache for something it struggles to understand.

It does not come to a precise conclusion on this issue before it decides instead that it would prefer to no longer be pinned underneath anyone as it watches over her.

"Please move," it growls out finally, when its ability to distract itself with the confusing intricacies of its own opinions and emotions runs dry. The damp folds of its shirt, creased awkwardly beneath Augustus' cheek, is no longer passively tolerable and instead teeters on the uncomfortable edge of panic-inducing. There is a part of Changeling that would like to remain in place until Augustus wakes up on her own, but it knows itself well enough to know that if it allows things to progress much further, it will lose whatever ability it still has to be chivalrous in the way it extricates itself. "Off," it emphasizes louder, pushing itself party up onto its elbows to jostle Augustus just slightly.

"Sorry," she slurs out, finally rousing enough to pick herself up off of the Changeling so that it can slip out from under her. It does so swiftly, shedding its shirt as it goes and discarding the fabric on the floor on its retreat to the corner, shaking the lingering ghosts of the sensations off of itself. It readjusts its headband and tries to catch its breath.

"Should I leave?" Augustus asks hesitantly, her eyes intense as she watches Changeling shake out its arms, wanting to cross them over its chest but feeling unable to tolerate the idea of brushing against its own skin to do so.

"No," Changeling pants, steadfast. It needs a moment, but it is not so overwhelmed that it needs complete solitude. The last thing it wants is for Augustus to go anywhere. "Stay," it instructs, and she nods loosely, dropping to lay back down,

eyes lidded. "I- Does your head still hurt?" it checks. It is getting easier to catch its breath, but it still feels all-too-aware of the weight of Augustus' eyes on it, it feels hot and too alert beneath her gaze. It wants an excuse to step out, to calm down somewhere else.

"Not as bad," Augustus reassures it, which still means *Yes*, because Augustus is very bad at asking for what she needs.

"I will get you some medicine," it tells her, and goes to leave and do just that. It pauses halfway out of the door. "Stay," it instructs again, emphatic, and waits for her to nod in acquiescence before closing the door behind it. Its heart is fluttering in its chest, stomach twisting, and the cause does not feel entirely physical at all, but it is a little less overwhelming now that it is alone. It readjusts its ears with clumsy hands, smoothing the fur back into place, and makes a hasty retreat to the kitchen where it can be certain its pacing will not disturb anyone.

"Hey, Spencer," its mother says softly when it stumbles into her instead. It hovers unhappily in the doorway — the constant unexpected encounters have grown tiresome by now — but then it pushes through to meet her properly. "I saw Augustus' car on the curb — is she spending the night?"

Changeling is too busy reviewing a mental note to hear the question. "Is there a spare key hidden on our porch?" it asks, squinting pointedly at the wall. "That is not very secure."

"Augustus is the only one who knows where it is," its mother says. "I thought we trusted her."

"I do," the Changeling affirms. "She should have the key. It should not be on the porch — someone else could find it. She should have the key."

It is quiet a moment. "Alright," mom says. "Is Augustus spending the night?" she asks again.

Changeling shifts its gaze to the clock on the oven and blinks in surprise. It is much later than it had thought or

realized; it had not noticed so much time had passed. "Yes," it decides. Augustus will not leave this late — her father's house is not far, but she has an aversion to driving at night, regardless of the distance. She will stay until the morning at least.

"Okay," mom says, an odd lilt to her voice. It glances at her suspiciously, but if she has another thought, she does not voice it. "Let me know if y'all need anything. I'm about to head back to work, but I'll have my phone," she adds instead, leaning in to bump her head lightly against the Changeling's as a minimal-contact goodbye.

Changeling sways into the touch, and then pulls back. "The key," it requests. "Augustus keeps them on her belt. It will not be lost."

"Well, I wasn't worried about that," its mother says, but she heads to the door anyway. "Not without a shirt or bra," she says firmly, holding up a flat hand to halt the Changeling when it makes to follow her.

It huffs. It was not going to *go outside*, but it stays put where she indicated and waits for her to return anyway. She presses the key into its hand and steals another head bump for her trouble.

"Goodbye," it bids her, waving after her as she departs for real. It waits until the door shuts and locks properly before returning to the kitchen proper, crossing its arms tightly over its chest and squeezing firmly. The pressure is reassuring, but it does not feel as warm as it had felt underneath Augustus. The comparison makes it feel so overwhelmed that it bites down hard on its lower lip to push the emotion back.

It resolves not to think about it.

(This is becoming a pattern.)

Instead, it digs a couple of protein bars out of the pantry, because it can no longer remember what time Augustus had arrived, but if she had come straight from work,

then it is unlikely she had eaten dinner before arriving. It is important that she eat *something*, particularly with Augustus' headache. Hunger will make the nausea worse, even if she does not realize it — she often fails to notice these things, after all. The Changeling gets a flash image from a documentary in its head — a wolf dragging a deer back to its den. It is good to be a provider. It retrieves the Tylenol from a cabinet as well, shaking the correct dosage out into its palm, so that Augustus will not be forced to endure the way the pills rattle noisily against the plastic container.

When it returns to its room, it is to find that Augustus has turned over onto her other side, curled tightly around another of Changeling's pillows, the knot of her hair splayed messily over the sheets, appearing to be asleep again already.

Changeling huffs, dropping the snack bars and medication onto the table next to its bed — it would do more harm than good to wake her up just so that she could take them immediately. It stoops to pick up a discarded sleeveless hoodie from the floor, and eyes the amount of space left in the bed calculatingly as it pulls it on. Despite the inexplicable desire for *more* in its stomach, in its Brain it knows that it does not want to wind up pinned underneath someone again if it were to lay back down. It also does not feel inclined to sleep on the floor instead.

It ponders this quandary briefly, reluctantly reaching up to remove its headband and hide its ears away in its drawer. It pauses to double check that it is not wearing its tail on its belt loop today, and then climbs decisively into the bed. It does not lie down, but props its pillows into the corner made between its headboard and Augustus' shoulders, so that it can relax but remain mostly sitting. A compromise — to be close without being pinned, standing guard over her to ensure her safety even at her most vulnerable, entrusted with watching her back.



It is careful to ensure Augustus' hair is not caught beneath anything as it settles, and then after a moment of deliberation, very carefully begins to untangle the rubber band holding her hair back in a ponytail. It works slow and deliberate — Augustus cannot stand to have her hair pulled, so it is imperative that Changeling does not rush or move carelessly. Hopefully, the relieved tension of the ponytail will help to further alleviate her headache at least a little bit further. When it finally succeeds, it puts the rubber band on its

wrist, so it will not get lost, and carefully sweeps her hair up higher on the pillow, where it can be the most out of the way.

Then, it remembers the key, and leans over Augustus' side to find her carabiner. It is always on her right side, which means Changeling can access it without having to reach under her, and it presses the little bar down to slide the new key-ring on with little fanfare.

This is a kind of trust too, it thinks, and then must carefully regulate its breathing when all of its limbs go stiff with some overwhelming emotion it cannot quite name.

Changeling settles back against the pillows, feeling the fabric shift just slightly with the rhythmic rise and fall of Augustus' chest. It is not altogether unpleasant.

It gets another flash image in the back of its head — a pack of wolves, piled on top of one another as they sleep. Augustus is, of course, not a wolf, but like this, Changeling supposes that together, they are close enough.



10. let's meet in the middle (and wait)

"How does one *ask* to be touched?" the Changeling asks, face pressed into the back of the couch behind its mother's shoulder.

Much to its own disconcertation, the Changeling has found itself unable to move on from the events that had transpired the last time Augustus had spent the night. The recollected sensations of the line of pressure where her body pressed up against its, the warm weight of her head atop its chest, the steady rhythm of her rib-cage expanding with breaths that matched its own. The thoughts circle and snag. Each time it succeeds in distracting itself for a time, the memory of it creeps back in again, until the Changeling blinks and realizes that the palm it has pressed against its chest is a pale and unsatisfying mimicry of the real thing.

It finds itself taken aback by the whole situation. The Changeling does not like to be touched — the Changeling has *never* liked to be touched — and yet it had permitted Augustus to lay on top of it for hours. And yet its brain continues to circle back to sniff at the remembered sensations curiously.

And *yet*, the other day it had hesitated leaving Augustus' car when she had driven it home after work. Had lingered in the open door, staring intently into the car's interior, until it

had caught up with itself and realized all at once that it was searching for the words to *ask for something* that it could barely articulate. It had slammed the door, mortified, and stormed into its house before it could attempt to speak a word.

It had hoped to push it down and ignore it — the Changeling does not like to be touched. It has never conceived of what it would be like to *desire* touch, has no frame of reference for something of this nature.

And yet, the thoughts had persisted until Changeling had no choice but to concede its curiosity. The desire for something it has never desired before.

Hence, its question.

"Hmm," its mother hums thoughtfully. "Just like that, I'd say. Same as asking for anything else."

Changeling growls, muffled into the cushion. It had figured this much already; the advice alleviates approximately none of its uncertainty. This means it must not have asked the right question.

It scratches its claws through the bristling hair on the sides of its head, careful to avoid jostling the headband of its dog ears, as it struggles to trace the thread of this uncertainty to its source. It attempts to picture making this request, and Augustus granting it, and its brain interjects with the sensation of force against its palms, reminiscent of a panicked shove demanding space. The blotchy, flushed texture of Augustus' face the first time she had attempted to touch its ears, frantically apologetic.

"If one were to ask," it begins, the words coming like metaphorically pulled teeth, but if it wants to know, it must ask. "Only to change their mind? Would this not be, cruel?"

Like Lucy and Charlie Brown — holding out the metaphorical football in offering only to yank it back at the last second. Setting one up for failure. A mean trick.

"No," its mother replies. "*If* that were to happen, then you could say something like 'Sorry, I guess I'm not as up to it right now as I'd thought'. Or even just, 'Stop, I changed my mind,' would work well enough on its own."

Changeling readjusts its weight against the couch and resists the urge to tear into the fabric with its teeth. There is something tight and expectant sitting in the back of its throat that it cannot decipher.

Except that Augustus is not as adverse to touch as the Changeling is. It has observed this in the many ways she has returned hugs with others that the Changeling would balk at, the way she has reached out to it and caught herself before making contact, or last week, when she had not caught herself at all. The Changeling is barely discovering what it means to want to be touched at all. What if this want is purely theoretical? Wanting the idea more than its actuality? Will Augustus be disappointed?

Would Changeling?

(Something in its stomach sours. It hazards a guess that this might be the true quandary. The Changeling *does* want to want to be touched by Augustus — what will it do? If it reaches out to sate this desire only to be repulsed by it? It does not feel fair.)

"Darling, you don't have to overthink this," its mom says, interrupting its train of thought. It can feel the cushions shift as she twists in her seat, and resolutely does not look up to meet her gaze. "If you realize you need to change your mind, then that's okay. You can still try another time, if that's what you want. And if you don't want to try again at all, then you still learned something, and that's another step towards figuring it all out. It's never unacceptable to ask for more information. And if anyone was going to understand, it would be Augustus."

At this, Changeling shifts enough for its glare to become visible to her — eyebrows pulled low and furrowed in the middle, mouth curled downwards, its nose wrinkled. "I did not say I was talking about Augustus," it protests flatly.

The expression its mother makes in response to this turns her face into a series of unfamiliar planes; Changeling drops its own efforts at a facial expression and glances away. "Oh? *Were* you talking about someone else?" she asks, the pitch of her voice stretched past expecting an answer.

Changeling pushes itself up off the back of the couch and stalks off towards its room. Its mother laughs brightly, unrepentant.

"I have bible study in the morning!" she calls at its back. "Ten to one, okay?"

Changeling nods without turning back to face her, and closes its bedroom door behind it.

It shoves itself into the negligible space between its bed and side table and ponders its options. Despite her heel turn into teasing, its mother's advice had been sound. Augustus is not overly prone to defensiveness — even when Changeling lashes out from a place of kicked-dog instinct, she is slow to frustration and has always allowed it to apologize and explain. If the Changeling were to recoil, she would not take offense; it had known this even last week.

As for itself, it would feel a sense of disappointment if it should need to draw back. However, its mother's perspective had been salient in this too. If it had tolerated — even enjoyed — the contact it had shared with Augustus the week previous, then perhaps a subsequent recoiling would imply "not right now" rather than "never again". And should the latter be the case, then the Changeling does not necessarily have to abandon the desire altogether. After all, although it has never well-tolerated hugs from its mother, the two of them *have* negotiated other physical displays of affection to occupy that

void together. Such an exploration with Augustus can only take place if the Changeling were to voice its desire to begin the process.

It sighs, shifting onto its belly to fish its phone out from somewhere underneath its bed. It decides to linger there, half-hidden by the bed frame, to sate the intolerable sense of vulnerability it feels creeping up on it. A wolf with its belly exposed — harder to be bitten if it seeks shelter. Its paws clumsy and tense as it taps through the squares in its AAC app, filling out the half-formed question perched in the back of its head in clumsy increments. When it taps open the "Other Verbs" folder, it finds itself briefly distracted by the sight of the awkward tangle of stick-figure limbs pointedly illustrating the "hug" square. Flustered, it pulls its legs up under the mattress as well, and hurriedly scrolls down to the W's instead.

'Would you want to watch Scream tomorrow?' it texts Augustus.

'Okay,' she texts back quickly, although she is at work, meaning it must not be very busy at the store today. *'I have to go grocery shopping, but if everything goes okay, I'm usually done at 10. What time did you want?'*

Hesitantly, it copies the '10' out of her text to send back to her.

The doorbell the next morning rings at 10:12AM.

"You have a key," it informs Augustus tersely, annoyed despite itself as it opens the door for her.

"Well, I was gonna use it," Augustus says, plucking at the key in question where it rests against her thigh. Changeling squints against the motion of it and realizes she has stuck a wolf sticker to the top. "But I got nervous that I wasn't supposed to."

"You are," Changeling replies. "That is why we gave it to you. For it to be used by you. You have permission." It hesitates, and then holds out its paw, "Give it to me?"

Blinking, Augustus reaches down to unclip the key from her carabiner and holds it out. Changeling takes it, and then steps through the doorway, shutting and locking the door behind itself. It hands Augustus the key back, and steps around her to stand at her back.

"Hi?" she says, peering down over her shoulder at it, her head tilted like a confused puppy.

"Open it," Changeling instructs, pointing at the door.

"Oh," she mouths, looking down at the key again. Then she looks back up to smile at it. "Thanks, Changeling," Augustus says, and then finally reaches out to unlock the front door and walk through it.

"Good," the Changeling responds, before catching the full force of her beaming. It goes to put the DVD into the player before the almost-cramping in its stomach makes it do something foolish.

Its anxious ruminations had eased after it had reached a decision yesterday, and then intensified once again overnight as Changeling began turning over the quandary of how and what to ask. It is good to be clear and specific when setting expectations, to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity when making requests. It had dedicated a significant amount of time to solving this puzzle.

There is a script constructed on the back of its tongue, waiting to spill out. This eases some nerves, but not others.

"How was the store?" it asks, stilted, to initiate this script as it busies itself with setting up the TV. It had decided this must be the precursor of its actual desired question last night. Augustus routinely does her own shopping, but it is a task she often struggles with. The fact that she was amenable to coming over to its house after making the trip is a positive sign, but does not inherently belie adequate resources for attempting something new. Therefore, if she indicates that shopping had been draining or gone poorly, then Changeling

will refrain from asking its true question today, and will instead save it for a more optimal time.

"Mmm, it was good," Augustus replies, settling down in a corner of the couch with a low grunt. "It was quieter than it usually is, I think. There wasn't even a line at the front at all. So I got done quicker than normal. *And* I didn't forget anything."

The Changeling nods to itself. This is a good response — arguably the best it could have hoped for. Its stomach still clenches painfully as Augustus tapers off, now that the time has come to expose its belly once again. It chews restlessly at the collar of its shirt, and turns itself around all at once.

"I have been thinking," it says, nerves pulling its voice flatter than it already typically is, "about last Friday."

It stares fixedly at Augustus' shoulder as she turns its words over in her head. Belatedly, it recalls that it had constructed its script to be spoken while sitting next to her, and hurries over to its spot on the couch, catching its tail to thread through its fingers while it waits.

The moment it sits, however, Augustus draws back to sit on her hands. "Sorry!" she squeaks out, the curve of her cheek where Changeling's gaze has settled flushes a dark red. "I'm sorry. My brain wasn't working right, and I know you don't like to be touched, but I wasn't thinking. I'm really sorry. I tried to say so after work the other day, but maybe you were tired that day because I don't know if you heard me."

Changeling blinks, the abrupt deviation from its plan briefly knocking words from its head entirely. "That is not what I meant," it manages finally. It shakes its head, "*Idiot*. It was fine; as I told you, I would have pushed you off if I did not like it. I- that is," it stops, breathes out, attempts to realign itself to the script once again. "I am *curious*. It was not unpleasant, and I am curious to try it again."

Augustus' mouth hangs uncertainly. Changeling smooths fur beneath its fingers and observes her jaw tensing around the side of her tongue. "Um," she manages, swaying uncertainly. "Uh?"

"Touching," Changeling clarifies patiently, as Augustus' inability to articulate her thoughts could be contributed to a lack of understanding its intentions. "Specifically, you in my lap."

This was another puzzle the Changeling had pondered extensively before coming to a conclusion. So when Augustus' face twists, and she asks, "Wait, won't that be trapping you?" the answer comes promptly to Changeling's tongue.

"I liked your weight, considerably," it tells her, as the weight and pressure had been a significant snagging point in its brain lately. This is a fact, but the words feel heavy and awkward in its mouth, so the Changeling shifts its gaze off past her entirely in an effort to make them easier to speak. "But I did not want to lie down again. And it seemed optimal for avoiding skin contact," it adds.

The Changeling typically has a broad distaste for touch in a general sense, but Augustus has a particular distaste for skin-on-skin contact specifically. It remembers this from her distracted rambling during one of their previous movie nights. The notion of a smaller, less complete touch — such as hand-holding — had been dismissed by the Changeling as less than ideal rather quickly, despite the fact that it might be considered comparatively "easier" than full-body contact.

"Besides," Changeling adds, flicking its gaze back towards her face spasmodically, "I will not be trapped. I know you will move when I ask you to. That is not being trapped at all."

A thin, wavering noise tumbles out of Augustus' mouth. The Changeling tilts its head and attempts to decipher if this is a promising sound or not. "I-," Augustus starts, and then

pauses again, rocking herself back and forward in her seat. "Now?" she asks, head jutting forward awkwardly.

Changeling nods and twines its tail over its palms in an attempt to be patient. It is important to avoid being rude or a source of pressure when making requests.

Her shoulder hitches up behind her jaw as she tilts her head, fingers postured as she considers the request. "I- Okay," Augustus says slowly, eyes blinking shut compulsively. Then, stronger, "*Okay*. I- Um. How-?" she shifts up onto her knees, wavering there uncertainly.

Quietly pleased, not only by the fact that she is amenable to trying, but also in the way she had not continued to ask if it was 'sure', the Changeling hurries to shove its tail out of the way. "Over me," it instructs, lifting a hand to steady her when Augustus nearly tips herself over in her effort to change positions. It keeps its fingers tucked in against its palm, and does not grab at her. Its other paw shifts to steady her leg as she swings it over its lap.

It is difficult to ignore the proximity of her face so close to its own. The Changeling keeps its eyes fixed on its thighs as Augustus cautiously settles her weight there, the movement delicate. The couch cushions on either side of it seem to bear more weight than its lap does; beneath its hand, Changeling can feel the muscles in her legs pulled taut — ready to spring up and away as soon as it says the word. It is a kind gesture, but one that leaves something to be desired in the contact itself.

Unthinking, Changeling hooks its fingers into the curve of her belt and pulls. It catches up to itself and lets go as soon as Augustus yelps softly and loses her balance, but the damage is already done — she falls the rest of the way into the Changeling's lap. They both freeze still.

Cautiously, the Changeling unfolds the surprised catch of its thoughts and focuses its awareness onto the points and

planes where the two of them now touch. The heavy-warm weight of her body balanced on its lap, the bend of her knees pressed clumsily against the side of its hips, elbows braced against its shoulders. It steels itself for an encroaching sense of panic, but feels nothing of the sort.

It is not, strictly, *unlike* being under one of its weighted blankets, but it is different. The weight is denser — more concentrated, and intrinsically *alive*, despite how still Augustus is holding herself, which the Changeling tentatively determines it is not adverse to. It stares fixedly at Augustus' stomach, attempting to determine whether it should relax, and feels its mouth abruptly flood with saliva.

It holds its breath as it struggles to identify the source of this response, but although it does feel slightly flushed and overwhelmed, its chest does not feel painfully tight, its limbs have not involuntarily stiffened, and it is not baring its teeth. It cannot decide what, exactly, it *is* feeling, but surmises that it is likely not angry, panicking, nor overstimulated, and relaxes.

"Am I too heavy?" Augustus asks quietly. Some of her hair tumbles over her shoulder, and she catches it to push it back before it can brush against the Changeling's face. It flicks its gaze over the awkward hunch of her neck and shoulders — an attempt to make herself smaller that fails, as their respective positions inherently leave her looming above it. It does not mind. "Should I get off?"

"No," Changeling tells her. Its voice emerges slightly too quiet, and it shakes its head to emphasize the answer. It is not identical to the sensation of a weighted blanket, but it is pleasant in its own right. Behind the simple deep pressure, there is a more esoterically emotional aspect to the contact that heightens its significance, but the Changeling does not quite understand it yet.

"Can you-," the words stall, and Augustus — who had just cautiously begun to relax — goes still again. Changeling

huffs in annoyance. "*Stay*," it reiterates. Then, "Against my chest?"

It lifts a paw to lay its palm beneath its collarbones, pressing itself back into the couch demonstrably. This is where the bulk of recollected sensations had seemed to settle; it is curious to see if satisfying it will reveal anything further. It is careful to speak this request, rather than pulling on her again — it had not quite meant to, earlier, and does not want to make a habit of it. Communication is vital, to ensure they are on the same page. The Changeling is aware that it can be pushy, but it is important this remain a non-literal quality, to avoid neglecting Augustus' comfort, especially when she seems quite preoccupied with the Changeling's.

"Oh, yes? I-," her voice catches, head twisting sharply to the side — once, twice, three times. "Sorry," she breathes, and Changeling shakes its head, attempting to make the gesture appear reassuring rather than impatient. Augustus hums out another uncertain, wavering noise — blinking rigidly — and then clumsily leans forward to rest her weight against the Changeling's chest.

The sensation slots into the place Changeling's brain has been restlessly gnawing at all week, and settles. The feeling of some undefined emotion intensifies, but remains a net positive. It *is* comfortable, it thinks, satisfied. Perhaps even more comfortable than it had been the week prior, having had the opportunity to prepare itself, rather than being caught off-guard.

Belatedly, it once again reminds itself that communication is key. "It *is* comfortable," Changeling states, allowing the remaining tension to bleed out of its spine now that the concern of sudden disgust or overstimulation no longer seems relevant. "Are *you* comfortable?" it asks, since Augustus has neglected to voice an opinion thus far.

"Sure," she says.

The word jars uncomfortably against the Changeling's throat. Augustus always tells the Changeling "yes" when they speak; "sure" is a word she uses with other people, when she is not very comfortable in her ability to answer exactly. A tight, cold tension sinks between the Changeling's lungs — perhaps it was meant to engage in a longer dialogue before they moved onto initiating contact. Perhaps it was pushier than it had meant to be. Perhaps something is wrong and it had not noticed. It squirms to attempt to look Augustus in the face; her gaze shifts to look over its head, but she should still be able to see it in her peripherals, so that is fine.

"You should be comfortable too," it tells her, firm, and then catches up to the words in its brain and clarifies. "It is only good if we are *both* comfortable. If you are not enjoying it as well, then we should not continue. I, I-," it flusters, and then pushes through its instinctive discomfort — Augustus will not mock it, so there is no reason to hesitate. "I *want* for you to be comfortable as well. *Together*. Are *you* comfortable?"

Augustus' face scrunches up around a blink, and then she slumps to press her face into the back of the couch. Changeling feels an odd tremor run through her body and has just enough to be baffled and alarmed by it in turn before she lets out a pressured, groaning noise from deep in her chest. "Yes," she sighs out, her body relaxing into the Changeling's all at once. "Yes, I - it is *very* nice. You are very warm. And comfy. But, I'm, I am overwhelmed; it is a big change. I do not want *you* to feel pressured."

"Neither of us should be pressured," Changeling agrees, careful not to move, just in case. "I am the one who initiated the contact. When I asked, you got up," it says, referring to the other night. "When you ask, we will get up. It is good to be on the same page."

"The same page," she echoes. "Yes. Okay. I- Okay. If *you* are comfortable, then I'm — me too. It is very nice. I like-

um," she cuts herself off. The Changeling can feel her the tic of her neck shiver through both of their bodies, which feels *strange*, but not terrible. "I have a question," she states, muffled.

"Okay," Changeling replies, and then carefully tilts its head to rest against hers, reassured that she is at least not *uncomfortable*. It can feel the edge of its headband press against the shell of her ear, but she does not protest it, so it stays put, even though its dog ears have shifted slightly out of place.

"I," she starts, then stops. It is interesting to feel her attempt to shake herself, only to halt when she remembers that the Changeling is currently sat underneath her. One of her hands tangles itself into the fabric of its shirt instead, and pulls; Changeling feels its face twitch at the sensation, but ultimately decides it does not mind. "I want to hold your paw," she blurts out all at once, words slurring into one another, and then turns her head away, as if flustered, despite the fact that the Changeling already cannot see her.

Well, it *had* dismissed the idea itself, but if Augustus is curious, the Changeling will not deny her the opportunity. "Okay," it says, reaching up to offer its paw. It nudges her shoulder when she fails to notice it with her face still hidden.

The moment their hands touch, however, she recoils. "Ugh," she grunts, a shudder pushing down her spine at the sensation. "*Wait*," she whines, a distinct pitched edge to her words, when the Changeling attempts to pull back further to remove itself from her space. "*Wait*. I *want* to." She fumbles to pull her sleeve down over her hand, clumsy with impatience, and the Changeling moves to do the same — using the front panel of her overshirt since it does not have long sleeves of its own.

They reach out again, and the fabric seems to help. The sensation of their bare palms meeting had been unpleasant for the Changeling as well — sticky and over-warm, buzzing

unpleasantly through the nerves. It is reduced to a more pleasant pressure with the barrier in place between their skin.

"Yes. That is a lot better. Is it, um?" Augustus says, keeping her hands very still where it is wrapped around the Changeling's.

It stares at their joined hands and explores the sensation and its corresponding internal responses. It is pleasant — more so than it had presumed it would be the night before. It nods.

"I have been setting aside money," it says into the space between their bodies, "for handpaws. They are expensive, but visually appealing." It squeezes her hand, feeling her fingers twitch at the pressure. "This would make for a compelling additional use for them."

Augustus squeezes its hand back, the corners of her mouth twitching. "I like fur," she says, and then flushes and hides her face in the back couch cushion once again. "This is *really* nice," she mumbles against the fabric.

It is nice. The Changeling settles their joined hands into the meager space between their stomachs, and tilts its head to hook its jaw over her shoulder. The movie had started to play at some point, it notes disinterestedly — staring at the screen without truly processing any of the visuals. The Changeling continues to ignore them in favor of pondering the sensations it is busy experiencing.

Warm and weighed down, mostly, which it is finding it has quite an affinity for. One of its legs teeters on the cusp of losing circulation, and it can feel its palms beginning to sweat against the flannel of Augustus' shirt, but none of these sensations have begun to tip the scales towards Upset. It can linger here in this space longer, it decides; this is convenient, as it had not felt inclined to move any time soon. Augustus seems to finally grasp the idea that Changeling is not about to demand she go away with no warning, and finally relaxes the

tension built up in her spine, curling herself in closer against its chest.

Big, it decides abruptly. The additional emotional edge supplementing the physical sensations is an intrinsic feeling of Bigness.

This paradox annoys Changeling as soon as it names it. This is not a situation in which it makes sense for it to feel "big". Not when Augustus is larger than it in every sense of the word — fat where the Changeling is lean, tall where Changeling is short — and when her position in its lap serves only to emphasize this disparity. Even tucked down against itself as she is, she *looms*.

Still, its conviction in this determination remains stalwart. Despite the apparent lack of logic, the Changeling feels *big* like this. Like the wolf guarding the mouth of the den, protective and important, tilting its head into the deferential gestures of its pack members.

It thinks of Augustus' tongue against the line of its jaw, and flushes.

"Do you think you want to do this again on other days?" Augustus half-whispers, and the Changeling flinches sharply at the sound — the way it grates agonizingly down its spine. They both go still as the Changeling attempts to process the disruption.

"I do not like the sound of whispering," it says, once it has determined what has occurred. It tightens its grip on Augustus' hand so she will not let go, and shakes the remnant buzzing out of its shoulders so that it can relax again.

"Okay," Augustus replies, the texture and volume of her voice returning to normal. "I'm not very good at it anyway. I'll remember."

"Okay," it echoes. Then, "Yes, I believe I would be open to exploring this further. Although, likely not everyday."

It is good to be clear when setting expectations.

Augustus nods. "Yeah," she says, tentatively shifting her weight before relaxing once again, her cheek rubbing gently against the texture of Changeling's shirt. "Yes. It is really nice, though. I like being close to you."

"Thank you," it tells her, and its words dry up before it is able to elaborate. *'For wanting to try, for being honest, for liking me, for being you.'* It cannot quite articulate any of these, but it feels them. Their proximity feels comfortable and overwhelming all at once — Augustus sighs contentedly against its shoulder, and its words scamper off out of sight. Changeling tucks its face into the space between Augustus' collarbone and shoulder, and closes its eyes.

Behind them, the movie plays on — forgotten.



||

///

