

## Forest

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Shurt's first breath of the day was full of the oxygen of the forest.

Shurt's fur was white-freckled brown, short and stiff along arms and legs, across shoulders and back. It yielded to skin around Shurt's face and soft underside and along the groin and strip between Shurt's legs which wrapped to Shurt's backside. Breasts, rounded at the base; Sleek slopes tight against the flesh and bone beneath the skin. Moist, odorous vagina and sleek, pale penis.

The bathing pool was down the hill from the hollowed tree where Shurt slept. There was a thin fog drifting toward the far side. The sun felt warm to Shurt. The water would be cool. Shurt stretched inside the hollowed tree.

Pantz woke, gently rocking. The blue furry curve of Pantz's hip was supported with cushion. There was no pain from the conifer needles nor the chilled morning beneath them. There was a slight tickle from the slosh and jiggle of intestines and other insides, which could be seen through Pantz's transparent abdomen, readjusting with each gentle rocking motion.

Finally, Pantz was upright. Pantz sighed, stretched arms, the shaggy blue fur shaking where it hung from the arms. Pantz ran the thick, black skin of Pantz's thick, short fingers over the smooth of Pantz's translucent abdomen and down into Pantz's seamless smooth blue of crotch. Pantz sat there for a moment, eyes closed, breathing in the morning.

Shurt could be heard splashing in the bathing pool.

The forest's ecosystem began growing in this valley aioiws ago.

Shurt scrubbed with a bundle of moss and leaves and watched the blue sway and wobble through the slits between the trees. Shurt could not see the hair of Pantz's head over the tops of the trees, but some of the tree tips shimmied as Pantz bumped against their trunks.

Pantz's legs were short and not directly under Pantz's body. Pantz's stride was not a stride. Instead, it took the form of a rocking from one leg to the other or a swivel in which the leg of one side swung to the front followed in form by the leg of the other side.

A hum began in Shurt as Shurt watched the blue. Shurt finished bathing and stood in the pool, gently combing with finger tips and short nails the hair of Shurt's arms. As Pantz came into view at the edge of the trees, drops of the sweet nectar were secreted from Shurt's breasts. Pantz heard the hum. Pantz smelled the sweet nectar. The swollen tip of Shurt's penis peeked from the water's surface. Pantz felt dizzy rocking onto the mud shore. Shurt slowly lifted a hand from the water to wave to Pantz. Pantz smiled, attempted to swivel and rock simultaneously and fell forward into the mud.

Shurt had fallen from a large tree. Shurt's fruit pod had slowly decayed, forest fauna had carried off pieces of the encasement for nourishment. Finally, Shurt had uncurled.

Pantz had blossomed. The large green petals of the flower had bent apart. There had been a pungent, sweet odor, similar to the smell of a fallen Markai fruit after the impact point has begun to rot. From the very tips, the petals of Pantz's flower had curled apart, slowly, in arches that had left them rolled into cylinders at the flower's base. Pantz had rolled off the base of the flower onto the ground still sleeping.

Shurt rinsed a clump of river-bank mud out of the blue fur along Pantz's right brow. Shurt worked the brown between the black skin of the thumb and first finger, sometimes cupping water and pouring it over the nucleus of the clump. It was while water fell and tiny drops sprinkled across the sensitive skin of Pantz's eyelids, nose, and lips, Pantz became conscious. Shurt had pulled Pantz into the pool, flipped Pantz over to float face-up, and started cleaning Pantz with no help from Pantz.

As Pantz's eyes opened, a flush of hot repulsion washed over Pantz at the sight of Shurt's hands, unrecognizable as hands so close to Pantz's face. At the start of Pantz's flinch, Shurt parted hands and looked into Pantz's eyes. The warm comfort stilled Pantz, and at the corners of Pantz's mouth and eyes the skin tightened, tugged gently, slightly upward. A soft, high hum escaped beneath Pantz's sigh.

*Bathing has been a part of homo sapien culture for centuries. The Romans and Greeks had public bath houses that held thousands of people. The Turks developed and maintained hot baths*

and steam baths. The Japanese traditionally bathed communally without division of sexes. Homo sapiens will later cut much of this forest.

*Macaca fuscata* can spend hours bathing one another in the hot springs of northern Japan during winter. The action is seen as a way of nurturing social bonds, strengthening troops. It also helps to ensure health through hygiene. And most simply helps them to stay warm. This forest is not located in Japan, though portions of it share latitudes with regions that will be officially recognized as land of Japan and the State of Gress, circa 2018. *Macaca fuscata* have never visited this forest.

*Neither Shurt nor Pantz will know anything of homo sapiens nor macaca fuscata.*

The final clump of river-bank mud dissolved between Shurt's thumb and first finger. Shurt let go of Pantz, who floated out a bit toward the center of the lake.

Shurt knocked another green cone from the *pinus coulteri*. Shurt would store the cones on the drying rocks. After the cones dried, Shurt would remove the nuts. Shurt looked to ensure Pantz was still floating in the lake before dislodging the cone, which took several small limbs with it on its way to drum the Earth.

Pantz bumped against the shore. Pantz slowly opened Pantz's eyes. Eventually rolling over in the water, Pantz clawed into the shore, pulling Pantz's left leg beneath the weight of Pantz's body, then rocking into a waddling step out of the water.

*Pantz is similar to ruminants. Of course, blossoming from flora, neither Shurt nor Pantz are mammals. Pantz however, does have multiple stomach chambers, several of which can be seen through Pantz's transparent abdomen. Various organisms and chemicals stored in these chambers generate much of the nutrition that Pantz requires. Sometimes after feasting moderately on conifer sap, Pantz can go for days without eating anything as the sap and chemicals and compounds synthesized in Pantz's body pass from one chamber to the next, catalyzing another reaction, feeding another organism in Pantz's body, and otherwise finding its way to where it is needed.*

Pantz stood smiling, eyes closed, and drying in the sun, as Shurt placed the final cone on the drying rocks. Shurt watched Pantz for a moment, vessels dilating in Shurt's nipples, vagina, and penis. Pantz lifted both arms out to the sides, eyes still shut tight. A breeze passed through the tops of the conifers. Shurt shook Shurt's head, eyes still following the tips of the blue fur

swinging in the air around the swaying Pantz. A hum began in Shurt. Shurt turned to go blackberrying.

*Some, including some botanists, would say Shurt was picking rubus fruticosus. And to many ears that would be correct.*

The brown and white fur of Shurt's left hand and arm protected the flesh of Shurt's arms from the blackberry's barbs.

*Others would say that these fruits, all would agree "berry" is a misnomer, were in fact rubus plicatus. Shurt's eyes have nine cone cell types. The black-purple of the aggregate fruit was a particularly vivid signature in this day's light. Ambiguity of this Latin nomenclature did not exist in Shurt's mind. Any ambiguity for others would be the result of the use of rubus fruticosus to sometimes refer to the subgenus sections glandulosus, rubus, and corylifolii; Sometimes to glandulosus only, and as a nomen ambiguum of all the taxa within rubus.*

*Neither Shurt nor Pantz will know anything of Latin nor any written language.*

Shurt placed the berries in the cradle of Shurt's right hand and arm, beneath Shurt's breasts.

When Shurt returned, Pantz was in the same place, but sitting. Pantz's little legs were out at angles holding Pantz upright, as Pantz leaned forward looking at the mud of the bank. Shurt placed the berries on another drying rock. After gathering the berries which rolled off and placing them atop the rock again, Shurt picked up one of the cones and sniffed it. The heat was already stirring the oil in the cone, and the molecules' contact with olfactory epithelium released rushes of currents coursing through Shurt's brain. Shurt thought of two days in the future and replaced the cone. Shurt leaned against the warm rock and watched Pantz.

Pantz stared at the mud. The photons passed into Pantz's pupils and bounced through the vacant tube of Pantz's droopy optic nerve until they reached Pantz's cranium. There they slowed passing through the cranium's membrane and floated in straightish lines until colliding with the cranium wall, lined with a dense forest of short dendrites. Some collided with photon-receptive dendrites and prompted axon firing. Others bounced off unreceptive dendrites at askance angles until absently connecting.

Pantz slowly lifted Pantz's left arm, slowly the arm descended toward the mud, Pantz's blue fur swinging beneath and swaying gently above and swaying and swinging at the sides. When the arm was in front of Pantz's transparent skin, a slick, bony, cartilaginous claw slid out

from beneath Pantz's thumb. Pantz closed Pantz's fingers and pressed the tip of the claw into the mud, as the hum's waves passed into Pantz's ears.

Shurt's pupils were in flux.

Pantz slowly slid the claw through the mud toward the seamless smooth blue of Pantz's own crotch.

Ejaculate ran down Shurt's still-erect, sleek, pale penis toward Shurt's moist, odorous vagina. Pantz fell forward into the mud.

