

*THE CIRCULAR PANGOLIN*

In the desert you're always losing something. When you're out of sweat, and you've pissed your last drop, your sanity seeps into the sand. Billowing clouds of ocean moisture drift into the drought just to die. Only curled-up armadillos can survive the caustic heat. Them, the cacti, and the cultists.

The townsfolk call me Doc because that's what I am. I used to have a nurse named Fernando, but Fernando lost his mind, so I lost Fernando. My job is mostly reminding townsfolk to hydrate, but sometimes I get to sew someone together, or cut them open, and they'd better hope I care to stitch them back up when I'm done.

Night's the only time you can have a decent walk outside, so one moonlit evening I staggered out with a bottle of tequila. I liked to circle the farms drinking until I lost my balance so the dunes looked like waves and I could pretend I was lost at sea. That night, though, a cultist confronted me on my porch.

The junior cultists came to town sometimes, but never to me. They came to beg for food on moonless nights wearing black hooded sun-blocker robes and slippers made of old rubber tires, and sunglasses and scarves. That's how I knew this monk meant business: they wore the full rubberized regale, not the mere habit of the novice. Instead of tire-slippers their black bodysuit had footies like pajamas an inch thick. I could hardly see eyes through their dark glass goggles. They unzipped their fetishy face. "Doc, we need help." Having spoken, they zipped their mouth shut.

"I've got plans tonight." I shook the tequila. They just motioned for me to follow. "C'mon, you cactus-herder. Can't you even tell me who's injured? What's wrong?"

They unzipped again. "God is leaking." And, zipped.

Well, what can you say to that? I brought my first-aid kit and followed them over the dunes.

We walked hours over the sand. Dunes looked like arctic tundra in the moonlight. Ordinarily I'd never enter the unmarked wastes, but the cultist seemed to know their way. "How do you navigate out

here?” Apparently that question wasn’t worth unzipping. The cultist just pointed at the sky. Their rubber gloves were so thick their fingers could barely bend. “You can see the stars through those thick goggles?”

They nodded.

“Doesn’t that suit get uncomfortable?”

They nodded, vigorously.

“So what’s it for?”

Finally they unzipped, and I never thought I’d hear something so sane from that black mask: “In the desert you’re always losing something.” And, zipped.

When we crested the next dune a sandy caldera opened before us. Junior cultists scrambled from cactus to cactus like bats sucking nectar from flowers. My guide led me through the throngs. I watched them cut limbs from cacti to replant elsewhere and propagate the species. I watched them wrap wax paper around red blossoms to preserve their pollen. I watched them slice a succulent specimen and pull down their scarves to lap the liquid which dripped. Not one member of the strange congregation revealed an inch of skin under their tunics and rubber.

I heard my guide unzip. “Do not make eye contact with the students. Life-essence leaks at every opportunity.” And, zipped.

“Is that all you folks drink? Cactus-juice?”

Unzip. “The cactus is like all organisms. It consumes foreign substances and transmutes them into its own flesh. We drink the cactus to become like the cactus. We don’t lose what we drink. We don’t lose anything to the desert.” And, zipped.

We walked deep into the caldera past scattered huts. The huts were animal skins draped over long, thin bones. I thought twinkles in the doorways were stars, but realized they were glints of moonlight off voyeuristic sunglasses and goggles. The inhabitants broke eye-contact when I observed them.

“What do you eat? Cactus?”

Unzip. “We grind cactus flesh into a paste. This paste sustains us without causing us to urinate or defecate. We don’t lose anything to the desert.” And, zipped.

“How do you fuck with these suits on?”

Unzip. “To do so would be unthinkable.” And, zipped.

“Now that’s no way to live.”

Deep in the caldera the sand was pebbly and coarse. Past the last of the huts some rubber-suited figures like my guide stood across the pathless path. My guide unzipped. “I am not holy enough to go further. You must approach the caldera’s center alone.” And, zipped.

Another rubber guide unzipped. “Stamp and shout when you reach the center. A holy man lives there whose renunciation leaves him almost totally senseless, who therefore has not lost a drop of essence in a decade. His sacred potential is so great, a cut in his robes would beam like the full moon. He will lead you to God.” And, zipped.

“Okay, okay. I get the picture.” The sand below was rocky and steep. I put the first-aid kit in my lap and descended the slope on my ass. “What’s the name of this holy man?”

Unzip. “To utter it would tarnish its purity.” And, zipped.

I climbed down the caldera longer than I thought was possible. The depth dimmed the moon and the stars. The sand turned into stones turned into rocks until the floor was paved with boulders. I finally came to a place where the boulders sloped upward in all directions, so I reckoned it was the center. I stomped and shouted at the dark.

From the dark, movement rumbled. A silhouette I thought was a boulder stood and lumbered on a gait restrained by thick black rubber. The holy man looked like an inflated cartoon character, a human with outlines eight inches thick on all sides. He wore multiple rubber gloves to preserve the barest use of his fingers. His giant rubber head-piece was spherical with a mere pinprick for breathing, and no other orifices.

“Listen,” I started. Realizing he probably couldn’t hear me, I amended myself. “If you can, I mean, listen. I’ve been mighty cooperative.” As if in answer to the inquiry, he managed to move his arms to twist his head so the pinprick for breathing was aligned with his left ear. I spoke quickly so he could move his mask back and keep breathing. “If you could be straightforward with me, just show me what I’m here to do.”

He swiveled his mask back to breathe. Slowly as dunes roll over the desert, slowly as stars roll over the sky, he shifted weight from one foot to the other and back to turn around. I followed, wondering if I could roll him to his destination faster than he could waddle. He led me to a gap between boulders in the floor. The gap was just large enough for someone to spelunk. I prayed it would not be necessary.

The holy man tugged my collar. “What. No clothes allowed in the underground?” He nodded, somehow, and I unbuttoned my jeans. “Did you call me down here because you don’t fit in the crevasse with your dumb rubber suit?” He shook his head. “Well, why am I climbing naked down a ditch, then?”

The holy man drew letters in the air with a bulky glove. He spelled, “because you’re the best, Doc.”

I paused on my descent into the ditch. “Fernando?” I covered my mouth. “Sorry. I’m not supposed to say your name, am I?”

The holy man pat my head, and he pressed me into the crevasse.

Deep in the crevasse the age of the air weighed on my shoulders. I lowered myself one ledge at a time while carrying my first-aid kit. The ditch was so dark I had no clue how deep it ran. More than once I cut my soles on the sharp unyielding spines of black cacti.

After a time whose duration I could not guess, I felt with both feet and found nothing below but cacti. I bouldered but still found only sharp spines below. I whimpered, having no strength left to climb out of the crevasse. I cursed myself for following cactus-herders.

When my strength gave out I fell through at least ten feet of painful plants. My back cracked

cactus fronds and three-inch spines stuck my skin like a porcupine.

Then I fell into an empty cavern. I hardly remember falling, or how long I fell, and recall only waking nude and bloody in dim light. The walls of the cavern were illuminated by shelves of glowing fungi.

I crawled to my first-aid kit. I started with an injection of painkillers, though it felt counterproductive to stick myself with a syringe when so many cactus spines poked from me already. Then I set to work plucking each spine with metal tweezers.

When I plucked my left arm bare it was polka-dotted with pox-like punctures. I decided to take a break before plucking my right arm. I examined my surroundings. The rocks forming the cave were bigger than the boulders in the caldera above; they were sheets of stone slotted over one-another like plates of armor.

Behind the glowing fungi, the walls were subtly transparent. I shuddered when I looked into them. Human figures were frozen in the stone like bugs preserved in plastic. I could hardly identify their features through the translucency. Some stood at military attention. Some sat with crossed legs. Some were balled in the fetal position. I turned away to pluck spines from my flesh.

When I was finally spineless I packed my first-aid kit and walked around aimlessly. Maybe if I patched up God they could transport me to the surface---maybe all the way back to town. But after some wandering, I didn't find anything I'd call Almighty. Mostly rocks and fungi. I wandered to the walls for guidance. "I don't suppose you frozen folks know where to find God, do you?"

"They already have." The voice boomed from everywhere. I felt stones beneath me rumble and writhe. "I did not hear you come in. Welcome, Doctor."

"You should have felt me, I think I landed on you. What kind of God can't feel someone crawling on top of them?"

"I feel everyone crawling on me," said the earth. "Noticing one of billions is more difficult than

you can imagine. Especially with skin thick as mine.”

Plates of stone slid over each other. I leapt from one to the next to avoid being crushed. Gaps widened between plates but in those gaps were only more plates, equally impenetrable. They unfolded like flower petals with only more petals underneath.

I found the spot to stand: the center was stationary like the eye of a hurricane. The earth bunched up around me like a bundt cake until whatever this was was satisfied with its size. It looked like a circular pangolin with no beginning or end and a billion scales.

“So.” I brushed stones with my fingertips. “Where does it hurt?”

Stone scales rustled. Plates parted like elevator doors. More plates behind them parted vertically. More plates behind them parted diagonally so pure white light leaked through a slanted slot. “Prepare, Doctor. This will not be a sight for which your vision is accustomed.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“I cannot.”

I donned sterile gloves and ran a finger along the shining slot. The circular pangolin’s inner light was so bright that I saw the shadows of bones in my finger. “I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“The holy man said you were the best available for sewing someone up.”

“It helps if I know what cut you open.”

The circular pangolin’s plates contracted in contemplation. “I harvest mana from ether. The astral planes resist my harvesting sacred potential by means of a hazardous...” It searched for the word. “Exoskeleton.”

“You cut yourself cactus-herding?”

“Metaphysically speaking.”

“Let me take a look.”

The plates parted. The brightness increased ten-thousand-fold. I could not tell the difference between opening or closing my eyes, so I closed them and covered them with both hands. This hardly dimmed the light. I felt utterly transparent. I wondered if my thickest bones still cast shadows or if the light penetrated even my pelvis and femurs. I stumbled forward, feeling for the pangolin with my hands.

I had to stumble farther than I'd expected. I heard the armor plates close behind me like air-locks. I felt labored breathing from all directions. The floor was warm and wet. I could only hope I was walking forward. "So, why am I naked?"

"My inner light would disintegrate your clothing. The holy man is guarding your garments."

My hands brushed a warm wall. "Is this you?"

"It is."

"Am I close to the wound?"

"You are inside it."

I pondered the contents of my first-aid kit. "I didn't bring enough anti-bac."

"It would be unnecessary."

"We can't leave foreign objects in you when I sew you up. It'll getcha whatever the metaphysical equivalent of an infection is." The constant blinding light meant I had to assess the wound by touch. I could barely brush the sides of the laceration with my arms outstretched. I could not reach the top of the wound even jumping with my hands above me. I walked hugging the left wall to gauge the laceration depth: I felt the left wall end twenty paces from the deepest portion. I'd found the outside of the pangolin. Even under the layers of stone plates its skin was a foot thick, and covered in hard scales. Each scale was bigger than my palm and razor-sharp.

"Doctor, what is your professional opinion?"

"I need to perform debridement." I tugged a loose scale until it popped off. "When the astral plane made this gash, it burned your tissue. I have to remove the char."

It took eight hours. I used the scale to cut dead flesh from the walls and floor. I was blind in the impossible light, but the dead flesh was dry and the live flesh was moist with blood. I couldn't reach the ceiling of the wound, so the circular pangolin contracted unseen musculature to bring the roof within my reach. Each time I brought an armload of dead tissue out of the wound, my old pile of dead tissue was gone. I suspected the pangolin ate them to recycle the material.

"I'm going to sew you up," I said. "I'll start by suturing the deeper parts of the wound."

I carefully opened my first-aid kit so each utensil remained in position. I felt where I expected needle and thread. Thankfully thread came in bulk. I painstakingly and blindly threaded the needle, and began.

When I tried to pierce the pangolin's internal flesh, the needle broke. "Damn!"

"What?"

"You're tough."

"But you removed tissue with my scale!"

"I can't sew with a scale." I felt the wet floor for my first-aid kit, and tried to find another needle. I pricked myself. "Oh!" It was a cactus spine. It must have slipped in my kit in the fungus room. "I might be able to work with this." It took some time to tie thread to the spine. Just as I suspected, the spine pierced the pangolin's innards easily. The giant rocked and rolled. I struggled for balance mid-suture. "Keep still!"

"It hurts!" The circular pangolin kept squirming as I sewed a zig-zag at the back of the gash. I retreated and tugged the thread taut. I felt the back of the wound. I'd closed it nicely.

"We'll just have to do that twenty more times, big fella."

The pangolin groaned, but subsequent sutures were swifter. Soon enough I poked the cactus spine through the full foot of thick skin and pulled the last of the wound shut. My roll of bandages was only enough for a courtesy-wrap. "I'm afraid that's all I can do."



“Thank you, Doctor.”

I stumbled back to the stone-plated outer walls. Closing the wound had dimmed the light so much I could almost see my hands. “Can you open up your armor?”

“Doctor, you haven’t claimed your reward.”

I turned to the circular pangolin. Its light was brightest along the sutured wound, so its edges were cast in shade and I saw its silhouette. It was long like a serpent, and most of it was obscured by awesome distance. The thing had as many legs as a bucket of centipedes. “The only reward I want is to drink myself to sleep in my own bed.”

“You’ve rendered unparalleled service to me,” said the pangolin. “You must join my highest order.”

“You mean the frozen folks by the fungi? No thanks.” I pried at the plates. “Let me out!”

“But you must have some reward,” said the pangolin. “What does your heart desire?”

I gave up opening the plates. I wasn’t leaving without a gift. “How about…” I searched the bloody floor. I collected the scale I’d removed. I put it in my first-aid kit. “How’s that? Can I leave now?”

“Thank you, Doctor. Yes, you may.”

The plates opened.

I couldn’t see anything outside because my eyes were adjusted to the bright light, but I felt the cool air of midnight. “Wait, where am I?”

The plates closed behind me. The pangolin sunk under the sand, leaving only the bulge of a newly-born dune.

When my eyes adjusted to the dark I found I was a quarter-mile from town, and my clothes were folded on the sand beside me.

I haven’t seen any cultists since then---at least, not on purpose. Sometimes junior cactus-herders come to town to beg for food, and when they do, they stop at my door to pay respects. Not to me; I have

to let them worship the razor-sharp pangolin-scale.

I asked, one time, “why do you want to see it? This thing is sharp enough to cut the thickest rubber suit. Shouldn’t you fear it?”

And the junior monk pulled down their scarf and said, “you must worship what you fear. It’s the only way to preserve your personality and keep memories from leaking. In any case, this scale touched the skin over the muscle connecting the bones around the heart of God, and therefore it gleams like the moon in my eyes.”

Whatever floats their boat. I use the sharp edge for whittling.

But I always carry the scale when I step out at night to drink. It reminds me to climb the dune the pangolin made bringing me home. There I drink tequila until the dunes are waves and I’m lost at sea.