

# A Hunter's Journal – Of No Importance

*By: Jesse Lee Keeter*

*(This journal was donated to the Royal Martuhk Library decades ago by a Shattervarkian goat herder who purportedly found it tied, along with an empty water skin, to one of his goats. This section chronicles the author's time near the White Coast during the Warm Season of 11290.)*

**108/33/11290**

It's still raining. Through the ship's thin hull, I can feel it.

My cabin has a diamond-shaped window with no sill and I can imagine a view through the greasy glass if I squint. There's a cot and a circle table the size of a coffee cup. Someone tacked dried flowers above the door.

The ship is finally moving, and I'm relieved to see Mooresbedlam's decrepit skyline peel away in our wake.

Gonna sleep now.

**108/36/11290**

Salt and copper. Today I woke with a red smear down my cheek; my pillow ruined. If there was anybody checking cabins they'd think I was up to no good.

Twin stacks pour black smoke high above the ship's middle.

Saw a few harriers slip into the mail slots on the starboard side. If Chatrika replied, it wouldn't arrive here. Last address I gave her was the hostel. Maybe I'll try and get a bird. Not sure I can afford the stamp.

Stole a loaf of bread from the galley. Maybe tomorrow (*words covered by red stains*) wander around. Well, my nose is bleeding again godsdammit. So there's that.

### 108/37/11290

A gal named Cate gave me some blubber in a circular tin with a tusk relief on the lid. Smells like nerve-cleansing flowers. What are they called? Cate said the salve is a mixture of narwhal blubber, a little honey and clover, and a few secret ingredients she refused to divulge. I've been rubbing the blubber into my nostrils. I'm not smoothed out yet, but the bleeding stopped, which is a blessing. Cate and I shared a smoke at the prow and pretended we'd see the coast any minute. She has a mole in almost the right spot to pass for a beauty mark and emerald eyes with stale-yellow whites.

Potent spliff. I'm halfway to the moon.

Cate left me alone up here, said she had to check on her brother, who is ill.

We've crept out from under the cruddy gray blanket which clings to Mooresbedlam's Coast and we're halfway to the Orange Isles. With the sun at my back, I can look over the sea of twinkling sapphires, and I can forget enough to... well, let's just say I'm beginning to relax.

I found mold in my cabin. When I wiped it away with the corner of a shirt, it smeared across the ceiling in a slick black diagonal. I propped my door open and hope that'll help air it out. I'm not worried about leaving my room open because there's nothing to steal, so long as nobody sees the bread.

*108/39/11290*

Land ho! The first Orange Isle (Manchuba?) slid past my window about an hour ago. I've been sitting on the deck all morning watching. I tried to find Cate's cabin so I'd have some company. The ship is bigger than I thought.

Some naked people with zigzags painted across their hairy chests tied a boat to a little dock on one of the islands. I shouted to them and waved, but they weren't interested. The family next to me (a slender, chalky fellow, his pale wife, and their two muskrats) looked at me like I was crazy. I was just excited. Judging by the wife's translucence, I doubt she'd left her cabin before today.

*108/39/11290 (Later)*

Reviewed the contract and everything is in order.

The info packet is a collection of articles from a Shattervarkian rag reporting the disappearances of villagers and livestock. A few villagers who spent time in the desert told tales of a shadow which "snatched" its victims from below.

Included in the packet is a handwritten note from Chatrika with the deal memo and a description of her dealings with the agents at the Guild. She didn't think too highly of the desk riders and

said she could understand why they hire out to freelancers like me. She was impressed with my file.

Tucked into the corner of the envelope is a thick gold coin inlaid with red gems in the design of a three-armed, goat-headed goddess.

Martuhk has a Guild outpost where I'll resupply. If I'm lucky, they'll feed me too. Thank the gods I made good on my union dues.

I finally ran into Cate. She says her brother's condition worsened. He was injured in Mooresbedlam and the infection turned to BlackRot, a sickness common among the riffraff in that disgusting, soggy city (especially those interested in intravenous enlightenment). Cate and her brother are on their way to Martuhk to meet with a healer. From what I've heard, BlackRot is the end of the line no matter what kind of mumbo jumbo you prescribe to. My first night in Mooresbedlam, I saw some kid puking bloody caviar and going deaf. Strange disease. Not sure it's even contagious outside the walls of Mooresbedlam. Cate told me all about it, but I didn't wanna know.

Martuhk, the largest port on the White Coast, awaits us tomorrow. From there it's a short trek inland to Shattervark.

### 108/40/11290

The long-necked reptiles and towering palms of the Orange Isles are behind us, ahead, the White Coast of Martuhk is a stark line traced along the horizon. Round buildings hang off salt cliffs. Slip Lizards glide along with our boat and pluck fish right out of the sea; the locals claim bigger

ones will go after kids. I've never seen it though, and I've spent time in the Cave Region (on business of course), dealing with another kind of reptile.

I finally introduced myself to the captain, who only speaks Martuhky. The conversation got off to a rough start, but he was laid back and laughed easily, so we powered through. We spoke with illustrative hand gestures and loud nouns repeated over and over. What was his name? Martez?

I'm starving. When we land, maybe I'll swipe another loaf of bread during the commotion.

### 108/44/11290

Sand. So much sand. A carpet of white powder covers the cobblestones, streets, and alleyways; collects in the corners on windowsills, in your hair, armpits, and crotch; in your soup, baked into the bread, and sprinkled on skewered meat like an intrusive salt.

It's hot. Stays warm long after the sun sets. A tepid breeze whistles through the maze of alleyways, rustling the asphalt's pale film. I need a drink. Might even deserve one. Guess I'm still pissed off.

Been holed up over a rug shop the last three days, staring out an attic window while the city implodes. We landed in the middle of the Hival Nocturn Festival. Customs were impossible. Confiscated my journal, Chatrika's coin, and the job packet, which I didn't get back until this afternoon.

The Guilds been on holiday. Finally opened back up today. I swung by to resupply and complain about the mishap with customs.

The red shawl and mask at the front desk was incompetent, despite his best efforts. I tried hard not to get pissed, but by the time their dweeb of a middle manager stormed in, pointed his finger

in my face and tried to pass the blame, I couldn't help myself. He and I shared some words in the privacy of his office when he decided he didn't want to be emasculated in front of his coworkers. He sweated over the top of his bow tie and fogged up his thick-framed glasses; he'd never been tough and was used to relying on his pay grade for backbone. I knocked him down a peg or two. I got the dweeb to comp me the upgrade on the Outfit Package, complete with Hook Gun and harpoon. When I was done with him, he even let me into the employee dining room to eat on his card. If he got lippy I only had to maintain eye contact and he'd crumble. Typical desk rider.

I lifted a pen set off the dweeb's desk that'll fetch a pretty penny at the bazaar, so I might take myself out for a drink this evening. Sorry to miss the festival but I'll have fun in its wake.

The bus for Shattervark leaves tomorrow morning.

### 108/45/11290

Torn open in a ditch on the side of the road is a shell of hide and bone, guts missing, slurped through the soft spots, bloated from having cooked in the sun. Underneath that foul smell, something sweeter. I couldn't place it. Bone white edges to the wounds, slimed with green film, and transparent as if the flesh were being burned away by a chemical treatment. Day old kill, plenty of time for the scavengers to descend and pick it clean, but no vermin, no buzzards, nothing. Perhaps this was the work of my soon to be best friend. We'll see. The bus driver didn't want to stop, but I insisted.

We're back on the road now. My head aches from the wine last night and I have a black eye from a scuffle I can't remember the cause of.

I'm sitting on the bus next to an old woman who's been asleep the whole time and keeps farting. The people nearest my seat think it's me and I don't speak the language enough to convince them otherwise. Oh my gods this lady's farts stink. She's wearing an elder's traditional sun robe, so there's nothing but space for the arduous odors to escape. I'd move if the bus wasn't packed. I'm lucky to even have a seat, but my hangover combined with the Guild's logo on my gear give me a very "not to be fucked with" air.

Said gear is hanging from a little hook on the ceiling of the bus along with everyone else's. The roof sways, a tide of multi-fabric egg sacks whose unceasing loll nauseates me. I puked earlier. Combine that with the farts and I'm barely hanging on.

### 108/46/11290

There is no electricity in Shattervark after midnight. White sand bisects an ink black sky.

I am writing this from beneath a scratchy poncho in Chatrika's living room, trying to navigate the strange task of chronicling at the tail end of a mildly (mildly?) hallucinogenic buzz... great.

Chatrika's whole family met me at the bus depot. They are wonderful. Chatrika is the eldest of Juanko and Joanna's children, none of whom are young enough to be considered children anymore. Her brother Marko and sister Charony are both married and have kids of their own, a daughter each, but I can't remember their names.

Half underground, the clay-brick farm is on the outskirts of the outskirts. The kitchen opens onto an inlaid sandstone porch, tan walls decorated in framed flowers and cactus prints, furniture made from thin slats of polished wood and wrought iron.

When I walked in the front door the kids screamed and clapped and let off little pull string poppers. We ate and drank and laughed for a long while. I was particularly taken by the red curry, very spicy, which mellowed when mixed with the yellow. Desert peas, whipped cucumber chutney, two different kinds of rice (that I thought tasted exactly the same), roast goat, lentil soup, diced tomatoes and peppers. We drank a traditional frothy punch to wash it all down, squeezed from the prickliest of the cactus fruits. I attribute my hallucinatory buzz to the punch, the strength of which is due to the extra pitcher I chugged at the sink when I helped clear the table.

At dinner, they told me about Chatrika's children.

The desert is where they gather the prickly cactus plants for the punch, where they hunt and herd their goats, where a lot of kids play, camp, catch lizards, and do all the things kids like to do.

A few months ago, the disappearances started. A neighbor's little boy went missing. Tragic as it was, it wasn't uncommon for a kid to get lost in the desert. But then another little boy went missing. Then a girl. And then a man named Onni. They couldn't find the bodies. They heard strange noises at night, in their backyards. In the morning, their animals were missing.

But what is it?

No one has seen whatever it is that's out there stealing their children. And whatever it is, it's coming right into their backyards for a meal now that the kids and the campers have all been called home.

I stood out there tonight. Just looking out over the desert, wondering, trying to see it, harpoon in hand. Maybe, I thought, it'll come for me. Slink out of the darkness and snatch me up. Wouldn't



that make everything easier? No dice. I was just standing there, watching the shadows of the thin clouds pass over the moon, thinking about infinity, when Chatrika found me.

She has the darkest circles around her eyes. When she told me about her twins, a girl named Izabella and a boy named Tio (who was obsessed with trains), she didn't cry. She told me the story of their first birthday when the cake fell into the well, the time they tracked blue mud all over the house and they had to throw out the rugs, when they went out to the desert to look for antlers and never came back. I invited her to stay and look out at the desert with me for a while, but she said she's seen enough. The trick now was keeping her gaze low, to cut out the horizon completely. To keep the world smaller, she said, like it was before.

I asked Chatrika about the gold coin she sent me. She told me they put them on the eyes of the deceased. She says I can keep it as my advance and as a good luck charm. I told her I'd need another if I was going to wear them like the underworld's sunglasses or I might die winking. She just laughed. I guess dumb jokes aren't an effective tactic when asking for a raise.

Now the house is silent. Everyone is sleeping or pretending to.

Joanna made me a rucksack with enough food for three days, but I bet I could stretch it to five. I'll leave tomorrow in the dark before anybody wakes up.

I'm going into the desert to find whatever is snatching children, and I'm going to destroy it.

108/47/11290

Fences and property lines are long past; I am officially on the Shattervarkian Ancient Plains.

Wild goats walk all over me right now while I write. They want my food, which I am opting to

remain stingy with, and they want some love. They keep rubbing against me, braying, trying to give me kisses. A hundred of them. Tall too, as far as goats go.

Juanko gave me a poncho for the trip and I'm lying on top of it now. Some of the goats have curled up next to me.

Spires of red rock tower in the distance.

I'm almost out of the blubber Cate gave me, using it on my lips now more than my nose. Earlier today my bottom lip split down the middle. I don't think that's happened since I was still in school. I wonder how Cate's brother is.

I have sand in my mouth. I can feel it rubbing against my gums in a not so unpleasant way.

I'll try to sleep now. If the goats think I'm out, maybe they'll leave me alone.

### **108/48/11290**

All of the goats moved on while I was sleeping except one. I've taken to calling him Ponchito, and I figured out a way to strap my bag onto his back so he can be my little pack mule. He doesn't seem to mind at all.

We walked a long way. Ponchito spent his time running ahead to whatever little tufts of grass escaped the sand. He'd chew on them until I caught up, then jump and kick, rub against my leg and take off again. He's not half bad.

I have a water skin that Marko gave me and an auxiliary one from Joanna, which I tied to Ponchito. I don't think I'll be able to find more. When I get halfway through what I've got, I figure I'll head back.

We came across the molted husk of a vulture, the only sign of our friend. There was that sweet smell again. Some kind of poison? A pheromone? Ponchito wouldn't go near it.

Later we saw a scorpion with a moth caught in its pinchers. The stinger's venom had done its trick. The ghost of a flap echoed through the moth's powdered wings. The moth was dead, but something in it kept trying to fly.

When I'm on the hunt I come across these moments, and I know I'll write about them later. I think: these will make for good observation, or they'll really give me a chance to expound on yada yada yada. But by the time I lay down next to these pitiful fires, burning roots and grass; by the time I actually get the pen in my hand, I'm ready for bed. I speed through my recollection, attempting only to find the corner pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. Despite my impatience, every moment out here holds water.

Today, for example, I was standing on top of a dune in this sea of white. Sand, smooth as glass, captured the reflection of the sunset. Land disappeared, turned to sky, melted into clouds, and I knew I was supposed to be thinking about something heavy, something philosophical. Instead, I was thinking that I really needed to take a shit. As the sunset entered its pink phase, I realized I was thinking about diarrhea, and I don't know, I just started laughing. Laughing really hard. In the middle of nowhere, rolling around laughing till I cried. I almost shit my pants laughing that way. I felt better afterward. And Ponchito, he didn't know what to make of it. He was going crazy, bucking around. My bag fell off him and spilled everywhere.

I wonder how long I can keep this going. There aren't many agents left for this kind of work. I know they call the folks who retired if one of us is hurt or can't make it back in time. Sometimes those retired folks go out again. I don't know what else I'd do. These jobs never pay the way

they're supposed to. Usually, one job just buys me enough time to wait around for the next. I'm lonely is all. Sounds silly. But look at me, my best friend is a goat.

Ponchito is looking at me. He knows I'm writing about him.

108/49/11290

I saw him.

Good gods he was fast!

Ponchito and I made it to the red rocks. It took me an hour just to get up onto the smallest spire, the thing must've been forty feet tall. I had my lunch on top. Ponchito stayed below and munched on some thorny shrub that was growing in the shade.

I finished eating and was staring off in the distance, putting off the climb down, when this big black bull comes limping over one of the dunes. I can see him out there against the white sand, clear as day, and WHAM! this cheetah darts over and takes a chunk out of the bull. The bull swings his horns but misses. Who knows how long these two have been going at it. The cheetah turns itself around to make another go at the bull, and that's when it happens. SNATCH! Like lightning! This...thing, this creature, shoots up out of the dirt and snatches the cheetah. Like nothing. A puff of white dust and they're gone. Gone! The bull takes off as fast as his busted leg can carry him.

After the dust settled, SQUIRT! The cheetah's body shoots back out of the sand and lands in a heap. Folds right in on itself.

Ponchito and I headed for the kill, but the goat wouldn't go near it. The cheetah was only an empty sack of fur. I had the Hook Gun out. I even kicked around in the sand where I saw *it* pop up. But there was nothing except a few long black bristles. Hair maybe? Spines?

We pushed on as soon as I could convince the goat to skirt the edge of the kill site and made some good distance.

**108/50/11290**

I feel as though we're being watched...

Found the bull's hollow corpse a ways off from where we camped last night. Whatever snatched him up digested the meal less than a mile from where we slept.

Ponchito has the willies. He keeps bucking around and farting. I'm a little nervous myself, so I keep busting up laughing whenever he does it, which only riles him up more. I wonder how long he'll stay with me.

I'm halfway through my water, but now that I've seen my friend, it'll be hard to just turn back. I've been thirsty before.

**108/51/11290**

Woke last night to screaming. Not human. Something else. At first I thought I'd lost Ponchito. But he was curled up next to me, shivering. Neither of us slept much after that.

I had my eyes on the sand all day. Any little breeze, a single kernel moved, and I had that harpoon stuck in the sand. I don't know how many times I stabbed the ground, but if it had been our friend ready to pounce...

We didn't cover much land today. I had to take the bag back from Ponchito. He was too wily. Kept getting freaked out and jumping around. The bag feels heavier than it should and the black canvas soaks up the heat. We're too tired, we're dragging our feet.

Made camp early. Gonna try and get some rest.

108/52/11290

I keep telling myself I'll turn around soon.

Ponchito is gone. Took off during the night. Can't blame him. Even though he has one of my water skins tied to him, the bastard.

I saw my friend again as I crested one of the white dunes. There *it* was, soaking up the heat on a large slab of rock, sunbathing like some giant withered gorilla claw.

An arachnid. The biggest I've ever seen, with so many legs.

I stood a long time, staring. Did it know it was being watched?

By the time I'd cleared the next rise, it was gone.

Took me all day, but I made it to that rock. Didn't even bother with building a fire.

I'm lying on the slab now, trying to picture the creature I saw this morning.

The air is sweet.

108/53/11290

Forget about sleep. I lay on the rock and stared into the sky, strained my ears across a night which lasted forever.

I have enough water if I don't drink a drop. I'll walk for one more day.

108/54/11290

Contact!

The son of a bitch made a go at me.

I walked the channels between the dunes and got turned around after I sat down to have a bite. In this moment of disorientation, our friend made its move.

At first I was fooled into thinking that bull had come back and was charging down the dune at me, a freight train masquerading as a black blur. Preceded by an explosion of sand, the creature emerged: dead eyes, a carapace of bristly armor, and legs, nothing but legs with clamps at the ends of them. A spring trap rigged with fishhooks squirts out of the sand. In those few seconds when adrenaline slowed everything, I could see how it killed, how effortlessly all the others had been dragged under.

I stabbed it right underneath the chelicerae, sunk the harpoon into its poison pouch. Pretty sure it was the first time it'd ever been anticipated. The fucker tried to change directions midair, which snapped the harpoon.

I swear the creature landed as elegantly as an eel slips into the water. Just slid right back into the sand.

One of its fangs caught my leg as it flew past.

I got the Hook Gun out, but it didn't surface again.

The creature doesn't need to come back and risk another attack, this it knows. Three hours and my leg already looks like it's about to melt off. I limped back to the rock where I first saw it sunbathing.

108/54/11290 (Later)

Poison climbs despite my efforts with the ripped-shirt tourniquet venom seeps into the old brain bucket and loosens the bolts I'm watching myself write this sitting cross-legged on the rock in front of myself leaning forward obnoxiously seeing if I'll notice And now that I'm reading this while I'm writing it I guess I did I consider sucking out the poison but I'm worried that if I could even get lips to foot my teeth would fall out the moment the venom hit my gums I hope Ponchito is okay The sky is lavender The sand is ice and broken glass My friend sulks along on the far side of the dunes out yonder Big dead eyes The monster will find its courage soon

108/55/11290

Morning

With a breeze.

For the first time since I left Chatrika's farm I can hear birdsong and this music has ushered in a window of lucidity.

In red morning, my friend crawled out of the sand no more than ten feet in front of me, and I watched him slink my way. I'd been still for a long time, and at that moment even I was debating



whether I'd fallen asleep, or if I was dead. When it leaned over me I could smell the sweetness dripping off its feelers.

I rammed the Hook Gun inside its mouth and pulled the trigger. Harpoon ripped its head in half.

More good news: Ponchito came back!

As the sun came up, I could see a herd of goats in the distance. Now that the monster is dead, they don't seem to mind it. I swear one of them even nibbled at the black bristles on the creatures back. Ponchito, of course. He still has that damn water skin tied to him. He's pretending not to recognize me, but I can see right through the ruse. The herd lounges around the big rock munching on scrub grass.

I'm glad they're here.

I considered starting back, but... I'm tired now. I can barely keep my eyes open.

I've planned it all out. I'm gonna wrap up this last entry and then try and get my clothes off. I can lay on the rock and enjoy the warmth. If I'm lucky, I'll be able to call Ponchito over and get that water skin off of him. If I'm really lucky, he'll sit with me a bit.

If I were to walk away from this unscathed, just cash the check and go on to the next one, I'd only be able to remember the broad strokes of my time here. The boat. The way Martuhk looked from the water. The goats. I would probably have to look up Ponchito's name in this journal if I wanted to get it right when I told the story. But look at me now. This is the most important moment of my life.

On the farm, the night before I left, I got the feeling that Chatrika, Marko, Joanna, all of them, they had hope. They were sending me out here on a rescue mission. In that regard I've failed them, though the beast lies slain before me.

I still have that coin Chatrika gave me with the red gem.

I think I'll put it on one of my eyes and lay back.

Now if I could just get that damn goat to come over here and give me a sip of water.

*End of document.*

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