

## **The Man and the Jackal**

A young man roamed the desert, knowing not of what lies ahead of him. Trudging forward through sands like snow, he witnessed in awe the moon itself. Perched upon a unraised platform, the man picked up his pace and stumbled his way through the dunes towards it, with its gaze as blue as the sands that swallow his soles. Each step he took, however, sunk the moon deeper and deeper into the platform that it once sat upon; by the time he had found his bare feet upon the plate for which it sat it had disappeared.

The man stood in its place, not in awe of the view that surrounded him but in disdain, for if it wasn't the earth that weighed his feet down he could have reached this place before the beautiful moon vanished. He was overcome with desire, and his heart would burst from his chest if it were not impeded by the ribs that keep him whole. He grovelled and whimpered, paralysed by his inability to control the situation. He was weak as the sun began to crawl over him.

As he whined to himself, the day passed, and the rays of light made him ache and blister. His shirt came unbuttoned, and his face remained flushed. By the time he decided to get up, his clothes clung to his body like glue. He nearly tumbled off the slab to find sanctuary under the temporary shade, which would leave him an hour later. He began to nod off, drained from his first exposure to the heat, until his eyes refocused and found a figure facing him.

A jackal, eyes glimmering more than any crystal, froze the man with his gaze. Its size matched his, as did its fur to his hair. Despite the animal's demeanor, it approached him wearily, with a gentle smile forming across its maw. It greeted him with a nod, and it began to speak to him. The platform behind him was built by a man long before him, who fell in love with the moon. It was raised for him to reach her, but he was futile in his efforts and passed before he could reach her, the jackal mumbled to him in a somber tone. What remains of his legacy is his attempt.

"I take it that this is pointless, then." The man's voice was dry and defeated, but the jackal responded with adamance: not quite, it said, without moving its mouth. The man before you was not equipped with my knowledge, knowledge that will take you to new heights. Heed not just my advice, but also my warnings, and you shall find the beauty you truly seek. The man's head raised, reinvigorated from the words of the beast. "By any means necessary," he affirmed. "Just tell me what I have to do." After hours of plotting, he began to trudge through the desert, and turned back to say his goodbye to the jackal. It trembled for a second, but regained its composure to give a nod. He turned back around, shrugging it off and realigned himself.

He was told that there were two gatherings on either side of the sun's path, and that he would need to reach both before sundown. To the east was a tribe of humans; he needed a blade to be forged to cut the sky so the moon would fall. Although it would take the rest of their metal reserves, they obliged, as he informed them that the moon could provide them a river and rain for their crops. The moon handles the waters, the jackal told him. He would have to return just before the night came, as the sword would be ready by then. To the west was a pack of coyotes; he needed their numbers to chase the moon closer to the man and to catch it as it falls. They were reluctant, but they began frothing at the mouth when the man informed them that the moon can bestow meat for centuries. The moon gives sanctuary from the sun, the jackal told him, and with the moon touching the earth all the vermin will be drawn into the sanctuary of its light. Both parties were appeased by the promises of the man.

The time came for the sun to set, and as the coyotes congregated on the platform the man had arrived with his shirt rebuttoned and a weapon double his size. The moon began to rise, and with that the pack gave chase. For miles they sprinted with an appetite that rivaled the man's desire, pursuing the beautiful stone in the sky. As the man waited for an opportune time to slash at the sky, the village arrived to witness the occasion, bearing empty pots to carry the promised downpour of the moon.

However, as the moon drew closer to the humans, they began to tremble. Disgust, rage and anger boiled over, as they had realized that the man chose to work with their sworn enemies. The coyotes trampled their crops and hunted their youth for as long as they could remember. The mob turned to the man, who had nothing to say as he had no idea. "You are no man," they cried, "as no real man could align himself with both man and monster." He was shaken by the situation, and fell to the floor once again. As their words weighed down on him, the coyotes pounced with great speed, their teeth bearing with the moon trailing behind them. Their promise of meat was fulfilled, as they had chased long enough to see the humans in the distance. Stunned from fear and betrayal, the villagers were defenseless and dropped their pottery as the animals ripped chunks from their limbs. They tore into the people upon the great platform, turning families into a mountain of bones and tendons. The little that was left was devoured, and the trickling blood filled the containers the people provided. A massacre stained the floor and had filled the bellies of the canines.

The faint voice of the jackal replaced the crowd and its screams in the man's ears: just let this happen, it said. This is according to plan. He regained his composure, only to witness the bloodbath that lay in front of him. Clearing his throat with glossy eyes, the man got the attention of the beasts: "You have yet to finish your job. The moon is closer, but not enough for it to fall where I stand." However, their hunger had got to the best of them, and they were immobilized from both exhaustion and satiation.

Dissatisfied and with little time remaining, the man began to shake with rage, and severed the head of each beast, one by one. He created a cushion with their pelts to finish their work. The moon was now directly above him. He slashed at the air, and slashed again, and again, each strike more exhausting than the last. He stopped, only to climb the mound of mangled remains to try and cut closer. His swings were relentless, but no progress came.

A noise climbed up the hill of corpses the man stood upon. It was a cruel, unrelenting cackle from none other than the jackal from earlier. It fell on its back and rolled around, shedding tears from laughter. The man grimaced. "You fed me lies." The cackling waned, and the animal looked up towards the man. "I fed you not," it exclaimed. "I had said nothing of this to you. Perhaps the heat spoke on my behalf?" It grinned, with its teeth bearing mischief. With a despondent look in the man's gaze, it continued: "I merely gave you directions to both the den to the west and town to the east. Whatever had led you to this was no work of my own. The sun must've gotten to your head." Its grin faded, and it turned its tail to follow the moon, which had passed the man entirely. The man crumpled a third time, this time unmoving.

He sat in solitude atop his mountain until daybreak. Although he could not reach the moon, the sun that rose was large enough to swallow him and the corpses below. He was greeted by the man who had paved the platform.