We were camping in the oasis. My companions were asleep. The tall, white figure of an Arab passed by; he had been seeing to the camels and was on his way to his own sleeping place.

I threw myself on my back in the grass; I tried to fall asleep; I could not; a jackal howled in the distance; I sat up again. And what had been so far away was all at once quite near. Jackals were swarming around me, eyes gleaming dull gold and vanishing again, lithe bodies moving nimbly and rhythmically, as if at the crack of a whip.

One jackal came from behind me, nudging right under my arm, pressing against me, as if he needed my warmth, and then stood before me and spoke to me almost eye to eye.

"I am the oldest jackal far and wide. I am delighted to have met you here at last. I had almost given up hope, since we have been waiting endless years for you; my mother waited for you, and her mother, and all our foremothers right back to the first mother of all the jackals. It is true, believe me!"

"That is surprising," said I, forgetting to kindle the pile of firewood which lay ready to smoke away jackals, 'that is very surprising for me to hear. It is by pure chance that I have come here from the far North, and I am making only a short tour of your country. What do you jackals want, then?"

As if emboldened by this perhaps too-friendly inquiry the ring of jackals closed in on me; all were panting and openmouthed.

"We know," began the eldest, "that you have come from the North; that is just what we base our hopes on. You Northerners have the kind of intelligence that is not to be found among Arabs. Not a spark of intelligence, let me tell you, can be struck from their cold arrogance. They kill animals for food, and carrion they despise."

"Not so loud," said I, "there are Arabs sleeping nearby."

"You are indeed a stranger here," said the jackal, "or you would know that never in the history of the world has any jackal been afraid of an Arab. Why should we fear them? Is it not misfortune enough for us to be exiled among such creatures?"

"Maybe, maybe," said I, "matters so far outside my province I am not competent to judge; it seems to me a very old quarrel; I suppose it's in the blood, and perhaps will only end with it."

"You are very clever," said the old jackal; and they all began to pant more quickly; the air pumped out of their lungs although they were standing still; a rank smell which at times I had to set my teeth to endure streamed from their open jaws, "you are very clever; what you have just said agrees with our old tradition. So we shall draw blood from them and the quarrel will be over."
"Oh!" said I, more vehemently than I intended, "they'll defend themselves; they'll shoot you down in
dozens with their muskets."

"You misunderstand us," said he, "a human failing which persists apparently even in the far North.
We're not proposing to kill them. All the water in the Nile couldn't cleanse us of that. Why, the
mere sight of their living flesh makes us turn tail and flee into cleaner air, into the desert, which for
that very reason is our home."

And all the jackals around, including many newcomers from farther away, dropped their muzzles
between their forelegs and wiped them with their paws; it was as if they were trying to conceal a
disgust so overpowering that I felt like leaping over their heads to get away.

"Then what are you proposing to do?" I asked, trying to rise to my feet; but I could not get up; two
young beasts behind me had locked their teeth through my coat and shirt; I had to go on sitting.
"These are your trainbearers," explained the old jackal, quite seriously, "a mark of honor." "They
must let go!" I cried, turning now to the old jackal, now to the youngsters. "They will, of course," said
the old one, "if that is your wish. But it will take a little time, for they have got their teeth well in, as
is our custom, and must first loosen their jaws bit by bit. Meanwhile, give ear to our petition." "Your
conduct hasn't exactly inclined me to grant it," said I. "Don't hold it against us that we are clumsy,"
said he, and now for the first time had recourse to the natural plaintiveness of his voice, "we are poor
creatures, we have nothing but our teeth; whatever we want to do, good or bad, we can tackle it only
with our teeth." "Well, what do you want?" I asked, not much mollified.

"Sir," he cried, and all the jackals howled together; very remotely it seemed to resemble a melody.
"Sir, we want you to end this quarrel that divides the world. You are exactly the man whom our
ancestors foretold as born to do it. We want to be troubled no more by Arabs; room to breathe; a
skyline cleansed of them; no more bleating of sheep knifed by an Arab; every beast to die a natural
death; no interference till we have drained the carcass empty and picked its bones clean. Cleanliness,
nothing but cleanliness is what we want—and now they were all lamenting and sobbing—"how can
you bear to live in such a world, O noble heart and kindly bowels? Filth is their white; filth is their
black; their beards are a horror; the very sight of their eye sockets makes one want to spit; and when
they lift an arm, the murk of hell yawns in the armpit. And so, sir, and so, dear sir, by means of your
all-powerful hands slit their throats through with these scissors!" And in answer to a jerk of his head
a jackal came trotting up with a small pair of sewing scissors, covered with ancient rust, dangling from
an eyetooth.

"Well, here's the scissors at last, and high time to stop!" cried the Arab leader of our caravan who
had crept upwind toward us and now cracked his great whip.

The jackals fled in haste, but at some little distance rallied in a close huddle, all the brutes so tightly
packed and rigid that they looked as if penned in a small fold girt by flickering will-o'-the-wisps.

"So you've been treated to this entertainment too, sir," said the Arab, laughing as gaily as the reserve
of his race permitted. "You know, then, what the brutes are after?" I asked. "Of course," said he, "it's
common knowledge; so long as Arabs exist, that pair of scissors goes wandering through the desert
and will wander with us to the end of our days. Every European is offered it for the great work; every
European is just the man that Fate has chosen for them. They have the most lunatic hopes, these beasts; they're just fools, utter fools. That's why we like them; they are our dogs; finer dogs than any of yours. Watch this, now, a camel died last night and I have had it brought here."

Four men came up with the heavy carcass and threw it down before us. It had hardly touched the ground before the jackals lifted up their voices. As if irresistibly drawn by cords each of them began to waver forward, crawling on his belly. They had forgotten the Arabs, forgotten their hatred, the all-obliterating immediate presence of the stinking carrion bewitched them. One was already at the camel's throat, sinking his teeth straight into an artery. Like a vehement small pump endeavoring with as much determination as hopefulness to extinguish some raging fire, every muscle in his body twitched and labored at the task. In a trice they were all on top of the carcass, laboring in common, piled mountain-high.

And now the caravan leader lashed his cutting whip crisscross over their backs. They lifted their heads; half swooning in ecstasy; saw the Arabs standing before them; felt the sting of the whip on their muzzles; leaped and ran backwards a stretch. But the camel's blood was already lying in pools, reeking to heaven, the carcass was torn wide open in many places. They could not resist it; they were back again; once more the leader lifted his whip; I stayed his arm.

"You are right, sir," said he, "we'll leave them to their business; besides, it's time to break camp. Well, you've seen them. Marvelous creatures, aren't they? And how they hate us!"

-Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir