

I would like to tell you a story. It is not a particularly long story.
This is a story about a cagroo.

There once was a cagroo who lived in the desert. It was not in any way an extraordinary cagroo. It was a cagroo, much like many other cagroo. Its fur was a pleasant cream color, but unfortunately matted and filthy. Its muscles were toned, but its physique was on the gaunt side. Its eyes were curious and questing, but distressingly fallow. The cagroo, through no fault of its own, had not eaten well in quite some time. The desert had not been kind to it.

It woke up alone.

It woke up, as it was used to by now, because of the ache of hunger in its belly. It is a terrible thing to wake up to hunger in your belly. Yet it is still preferable to waking briefly to the feeling of a predator's jaws closing around your throat, and then never waking again. So, without complaint, it rose.

Immediately, it began its search for food, alone. It would do this until the sun went down and it could no longer hunt for food, at which point it would still go to sleep... assuming it hadn't been struck down by a predator, or accident, or some other disaster. There was no time for anything else.

"Anything else" included other cagroo. Food was scarce in the desert; no cagroo had anything to share with any other cagroo. Quite the opposite: every cagroo fought to be the one to receive what little bounty the desert had to offer. Our cagroo might be fleet; but if it was not the fleetest, another cagroo could outrun it and claim a piece of fruit first. Our cagroo might be keen; but if it was not the keenest, another cagroo might spot the tender sprout first, and claim it.

The cagroo was alone.

Well, not entirely alone. It did have a constant companion: Fear. It was Fear that taught it that any quiet sound might be the approach of a predator. It was Fear that taught it that any sudden movement might be a claw coming for its throat, or a fang hoping to sink its venom into the cagroo's flesh.

It was Fear that taught it that other cagroo had greedy bellies. If another cagroo awoke sooner, or ran more swiftly, or had keener eyes, that cagroo could deprive our cagroo of what would have otherwise been its only meal that day.

If another cagroo was stronger, or faster... or in some cases, if that other cagroo kicked harder.

Fear was the cagroo's constant companion. And where there is fear, there is violence. What else is a cagroo to do, when the pain in their belly makes such demands?

A cagroo living in the desert might – *might* – someday have the chance to search for a mate. If both were lucky, and ate well (which, in the desert, might mean a meal every other day), and found shelter away from claws and fangs and heat and sand and cold... those cagroos *might* have the chance to bond, and procreate.

For now, there was no time for that. There was no energy for that. There was no safety in that. There was only survival. Right now, other cagroos could only be competition for the limited nutrition offered by the desert wastes. The cagroo was alone. Even when it came across another cagroo, it was alone in its desperate struggle.

This is the nature of endless, meaningless competition – it always, always diminishes and isolates. The cagroo of the desert are divided, afraid, and alone.

It quested through the desert, hoping to find something to fill its belly. The ache that had awoken it was now a sharp pain. If it could find a fallen piece of fruit, that might stave off the worst of the pain, at least for a little while. It had to hope that it could find fruit before a predator found it – it was a swift and clever cagroo, but it had little energy left in its body for flight. Even if it could escape, the cost of escaping might be too much to bear.

This is the nature of violence – it always, always has a cost.

When a body is hungry, it begins to digest itself.

When a mind is isolated, it begins to digest itself.

Where there is fear, there is violence. Where there is violence, there is isolation. Where there is isolation – true isolation – there is self-violence.

As it turns out, the cagroo would not have to worry about food, or predators, or shelter, or competition for much longer. For as it quested through the desert, its otherwise keen and inquisitive eyes, tired from days of endless struggle, missed a particularly sharp shard of wood hidden among the sands.

It had let its guard down for one second. That's just how the desert was. Any lowering of your defenses, any momentary lapse in concentration, any crack in your defenses, and it was over. Such is the nature of the desert. There is no mercy to be found in the relentless sun, the freezing nights, the harsh winds or the hungry maws.

It stepped on the shard, and died.

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Not immediately, of course. The wood had merely hobbled it, and in doing so, had *effectively* killed it. Its heart still beat in its chest – but not for much longer. It could no longer satisfy the needs of its belly, or escape from a predator, or even find shelter to sleep. It was alive in one sense, but in another, much more important sense, it was dead. There was no mercy from the desert. There was no care from the desert. Injured and alone, it would not live to see another sunrise.

I warned you that this was not a particularly long story, didn't I?

Fear left it. It was over. Its struggles were over.

And so the cagroo lay down, and closed its eyes, and waited for death to find it. It knew, instinctively, that it would not have to wait long.

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I have told you a few things about this cagroo. I told you that its fur was a pleasant cream color. I have mentioned that its muscles were toned. I have mentioned that its eyes were curious and questing, and keen, and inquisitive. These things I have told you, and all of them are true.

Of the cagroo's qualities, though, there was an important one I failed to mention.

I have told you a little lie by omission.

My apologies. Such is the nature of parables. I will rectify this omission now.

Of all the things this cagroo was – handsome, strong, curious and keen – this cagroo had one quality that, right now, stood above all the others.

This cagroo was also very, very lucky.

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For what found the cagroo next was *not* death, but a merchant traveling to Althar. The merchant, compassion in his heart (and space in his cart), managed to load the injured, unconscious cagroo among his wares and convey it back to Althar.

When the cagroo woke next, it was in a soft bundle of hay. There were fresh cereal grains in a deep bowl before it, and a plate of fresh fruit, especially soft and sweet from being a bit overripe. The pain in its foot was diminished – the cagroo did not know what a "salve" is, or what "bandages" are, but it can understand when something relieves it from its pain. And as it ate, greedily and frantically, so too was the pain in its belly finally, finally relieved.

It took some time for it to learn that things were different in the city.

There were no predators here. At first, it flinched away from any sudden movement. The merchant used a word with it in these moments: "relax." The merchant would repeat this word with it a lot: "relax, relax, relax." The cagroo did not understand this word at first, even though it understood the soothing tone in the merchant's voice and the gentle way the merchant placed their hands on its face and side.

It had never been able to practice "relax" before. There was no space to "relax" in the desert. The cagroo had "relaxed" only once in its adult life prior to this: when it had laid down to die, knowing death had finally found it.

But as the weeks passed, and the sudden movements never became the claws or fangs of a predator, the clever cagroo learned. As the cagroo ate its fill by day and slept in the pleasant air of the stable at night, the clever cagroo learned. It was safe here! Fear – once the cagroo's constant companion and the means by which it survived – served no more purpose.

And so, slowly, this clever cagroo shed its fear, like a weighted mantle that hangs heavy on the bearer's shoulders.

The desert had been cruel to it. But the city was kind to it.

No longer did it have to fear hunger, for the merchant provided all it needed to eat.

No longer did it have to fear predators, for the city kept such predators outside of its borders.

No longer did it have to seek shelter, for the roof over its head kept it safe and comfortable, and its pile of soft hay soon became familiar and cozy. The days were no longer spent struggling endlessly beneath a brutal sun. The nights were no longer spent huddling away from the freezing winds. It was safe.

Its fur is still cream-colored, but no longer matted. It is lovingly brushed and tended to, something the cagroo enjoys greatly. Now its fur is lustrous and gorgeous.

Its muscles are still toned, but no longer is its physique gaunt. Now it is healthy, with only a small scar to mark where once a wooden shard pierced its foot. It enjoys being fed delicious meals multiple times per day. (It quite enjoys them, in fact. It is, perhaps, on the plump side. It *might* be a bit spoiled.)

Its eyes are keen, and inquisitive, and curious. In fact, I can't say I've ever met another cagroo with eyes that are more curious.

What it enjoys most, perhaps, is other cagroos. No longer are other cagroos a source of competition. No longer do they only add to its struggles. No longer is it divided from them. No longer are they something to be feared!

After it recovered, the merchant had it pull their cart along with other cagroo. And although the cart was heavy, being much-laden with goods, the work was light. It seemed impossible! On any given day, the cart was stacked high with building materials, precious furniture, heavy cloth, crates of amphora filled with wine – far, far too much for a cagroo to carry. Yet the cagroo found, when it pulled in time with the other cagroo around it, the work was light! Step by step, all the cagroo moved forward together, and the heavy cart moved with them, as if it barely weighed anything at all.

There was no more endless, meaningless competition. Now there was cooperation, with purpose.

And when the work of the day was done, it would return to its stables, to socialize and play with the other cagroo there. And this, most of all, it loved – how it would nuzzle its companions when harnessed next to them, eager for the day's work (or, more likely, the treats it would earn along the way). How it would play with them when the day's work was done!

No longer was the cagroo alone!

I don't expect the cagroo to understand why any of this is possible.

I don't expect it to understand how the desert divided it from its fellows, or how the city reunited it.

I don't expect it to understand why the desert is a wasteland of scarcity, while the city is a place of plenty.

I don't expect it to understand how its life went from one of fear and violence, to one of love and care.

But I hope you understand.

This story is mostly true. I was obviously not present for the cagroo's life before it was rescued. I am, perhaps, exaggerating some of its struggles, or how it interacted with other cagroo before it came to live in the city. Such is the nature of parables.

All I know about the cagroo's past is what the merchant was able to tell me when he sold it to my temple.

All I know is that the cagroo has come to serve my temple well, whether carrying me atop its back, or pulling a cart with the other cagroo in its new home. All I know is that it is cared for in every regard, and shows no sign of discontentment when it is harnessed or saddled and put to work. Indeed, it takes to its tasks eagerly.

All I know is the cagroo watches me keenly whenever I enter the stables, hopping from one foot to the other, well aware it will not be hard to beg a treat off of me.

And all I know is that it still recognizes the other cagroos that it was stabled with previously, from the way it rushes over to nuzzle at them when they recognize each other in the street.

All I know is that it has shed its fear. And in doing so, it has become a part of Althar, same as you and I. And what I know best of all, is what the cagroo learned here: that the load is light when we all pull in the same direction.

May we live and work in Unity.