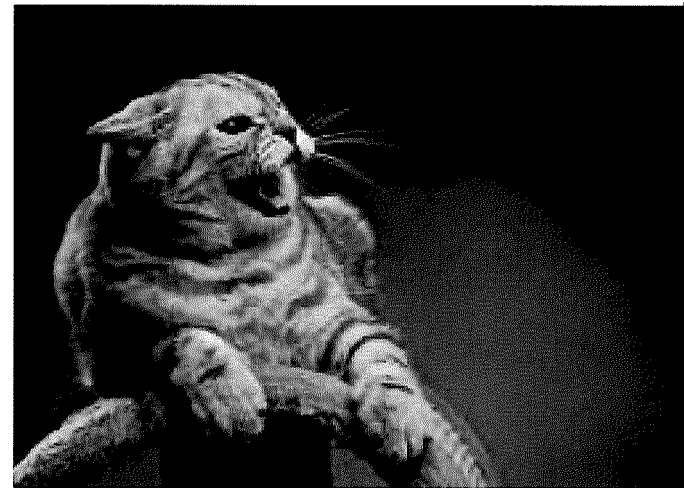


# Clawed the cat and the child in the stable



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him for the rest of his life. And so he worshiped the child, even if he didn't understand the meaning of the word.

As for the rest of the animals, he now took delight in rubbing up against their legs and purring with all his might. He and Gerald became great friends, and he spent more and more time with Candice - not just because she made sure he had some milk to drink, but simply because she was Candice.

After all, that's what the human baby had done for him.

Clawed felt something he had been trying to bury for a long, long time - love. Here was a creature who didn't challenge him to fight in order to belong. Clawed knew beyond doubt that he was loved and accepted simply because he was who he was. He knew that he didn't have to prove himself to this child - it was as though he had known Clawed all his life, and loved him despite his tatty appearance and toughness. He also felt a tenderness towards this child, and wanted to give him everything that he remembered receiving from his mother, and - he realised - from Candice. He saw that he had been so intent on being tough that he hadn't really appreciated Candice's kindness.

And so, with his heart softened, he jumped down from the manger, padded over to Candice (who was dozing in her stall) and rubbed himself against her leg, purring loudly. It had been a long time since Clawed had purred in contentment, and it felt good.

After that he sat in Candice's stall, thinking about things - lots of things. For instance, he looked at Gerald, the goat (now asleep and leaning against one of the camels) and thought, 'You know, we're very much alike, you and I. You act out your hurts by bossing everybody around. I act out my hurts by being tough, and not letting anyone come near me. We both swagger around, in a way.' He also thought that he'd had enough of swaggering and being tough, especially if it meant not appreciating the kindness of others like Candice. Perhaps Gerald now felt the same. He resolved to get to know them both better, even if that meant letting his guard down.

Then he curled up and slept more peacefully than he had for a long, long time.

The next day the humans and their animals left the stable. Clawed was sorry to see the baby go, but knew that he would love

Clawed was a tough cat, skinny, wiry and bearing the scars of many battles. He roamed the streets of Bethlehem with other cats like him. We would call them 'strays', or 'feral' nowadays. Life had not been easy for Clawed. His mother died when he was still a kitten, and he was left to fend for himself and learn to survive on the streets. His only friends - if you could call them that - were other cats who grudgingly respected his fighting skills. If he had been honest, Clawed would have said that he yearned to belong, *really* belong. But that would be too soft, and soft is what you can't be on the streets.

No human being in the town showed any kindness towards Clawed or his friends, even if they did serve to keep the rat population down. They would throw stones at them, especially when they were yowling at night on somebody's wall. Mind you, the cats would have called it singing, but the humans didn't share their sentiments at all.

Candice, the cow, however, broke all the rules by caring about him. She lived in a stable at the back of a run down inn, close to the outskirts of the town, where he sometimes found shelter on cold nights. Candice would provide a little puddle of milk for him by kicking over the bucket when she was being milked. That didn't please the human milking her, but it did please Clawed. He would sneak in later and lap it up greedily. Sometimes, when Candice turned her big head around to him, gazed at him with her big soft eyes and give him a lick, he was reminded of the warmth of his mother's fur, and the soothing feel of her rough tongue grooming him. But he didn't waste too much time thinking about that either.

A cat had to be tough to survive, not soppy and sentimental.

In the stable Clawed also found a source of amusement in the character of Gerald the Goat. Gerald was the one who bossed

the rest of the animals around, bullying them keeping them in line. Clawed liked straightforward animals - you know, the kind who called a spade a spade - not ones who thought they were so much better than others. Somebody like Gerald brought out the mischief in him. He just wanted to bring him down a peg or two. So he would do things like strut behind Gerald as he bleated his orders, and imitate his arrogant swagger, until the other animals sniggered. Gerald would turn around angrily, only to find Clawed sitting, innocently licking his paws and washing his ears. Cats are really good at doing that.

Then one night, when Clawed slipped in out of the cold, he found two humans, a man and a woman, in the stable. Humans, in his experience, were not to be trusted, so he kept out of sight between Candice's legs while he watched warily. They looked very tired, and seemed to be engrossed in something in the manger. Whatever it was, it was making Gerald very unhappy. 'Serves him right.' thought Clawed. 'It's about time he met something he couldn't boss around.' Then the woman picked up the bundle out of the manger, and he realised that it was a baby. 'This isn't where a human baby should be,' he thought. 'not in a stable!' That made him remember the coldness he felt as an abandoned kitten. 'Maybe we have something in common,' he said to himself, 'but at least you've got your mum.' This made him feel sad and a little bitter.

The stable got even busier that night. Clawed watched as another two humans came in carrying lambs. They put them in front of the manger, as if they were gifts of some kind, then knelt down, took off their hats and bowed their heads. Now if Clawed hadn't been so busy on the streets fighting for his life he would have been able to recognise this as an act of worship. But worship was not a word in his vocabulary. Their actions simply puzzled him. He did,

however, feel a stirring of curiosity and wonder. 'What's so special about this baby?' he thought.

And if that wasn't enough, a little later three more humans came into the stable leading camels, and did the same thing! Only this time they placed their three gifts of jewel encrusted boxes and bottles on the floor. Heaven knows what was in them, but that didn't interest Clawed much at all. He was far more interested in their fine cloths and turbans, because it meant that they were very rich. He'd spent a lot of time skulking around the houses of rich people, because the pickings were good - lots of food scraps, more than he would find in any rubbish heap behind a hovel. Perhaps these humans might leave behind something he could eat. His mouth watered at the thought.

Gerald, meanwhile, was almost beside himself. Clawed watched him with some amusement take it out on one of the camels. But it seems that he had met his match. The camel simply directed him to the manger, as if this would solve the argument. Clawed was surprised when Gerald actually did go over to the manger and peer into it. He was sure that he would find a comer and sulk, because that's what Gerald normally did when he lost an argument. What was even more surprising was that when Gerald came back to the camel, he walked slowly. His brash swagger was gone. Something had changed in him.

This aroused Clawed's curiosity even more, and he resolved to see for himself what the fuss was all about.

He waited until everyone was asleep, then crept out from between Candice's legs and over to the manger. He jumped up onto the edge and peered in.

The baby was awake, and stirring. He looked at Clawed, and his hand brushed against his whiskers. Then he smiled and gurgled.