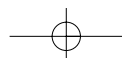


# CATLIGULA

ROBIN PRICE



**MÖGZILLA**



## CATLIGULA

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*For Scarlet...*

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## THE TALE SO FAR...

**C**ATLIGULA is the second book in the SPARTAPUSS series. It is set in ancient Rome in a world ruled entirely by cats, where humans have never existed.

In I AM SPARTAPUSS, the first book in the series, Spartapuss is comfortable managing Spatopia, Rome's finest Bath and Spa. He is a loyal servant to his master Clawdius – a cat of the Imperial Family.

But Fortune has other plans for him. There is a nasty incident in the vomitorium. It causes offence to Gattus Tiberius, (nicknamed 'Catligula') the would-be heir to the cushioned throne. Spartapuss is thrown into prison, only to be released into Gladiator training school. He fights at the Games and is freed by Catligula. This makes Clawdius angry, for he has now lost a valuable slave. Shortly afterwards, Spartapuss rescues Catligula from the wreckage of a chariot crash.

In CATLIGULA, the second book in the series, Spartapuss finds himself free, but unemployed.

# DRAMATIS PAWSONAE

Who's who!

From the deserts of Fleagyp to the forests of Purrmania,  
The Feline Empire rules the known world.

## **Cats of the Imperial Family:**

**Tiberius** – Rome's aging Emperor. Nickname: 'Tibbles'  
**'Catligula'** – Real name Gattus Tiberius. Next in line for  
the cushioned throne  
**Clawdius** – Catligula's uncle. Owner of Spatopia, 'Rome's  
Finest Bath and Spa' and Spartapuss' ex-master  
**Mogullania** – Clawdius' wife

## **Cats of the military:**

**Captain Matro** – head of the Sprætorian guard  
**Dogren of Purrmania** – chief of the Emperor's Bodyguards,  
commonly known as 'the Purrmanians'

## **Slaves, freedcats, strays and other animals:**

**Spartapuss** – ex-manager of Spatopia, recently freed but  
now unemployed  
**Russell** – a crow. A good friend of Spartapuss  
**Katrin** – a cook at Spatopia  
**Neferkitti** – a cleaner at the Imperial palace  
**Tefnut** – a mystic

Find out more at [www.mogzilla.co.uk](http://www.mogzilla.co.uk)

## APURILIS XII

April 12th

IT'S BEEN A WHILE since I've written this diary of mine, but now I will take pen to paw once again. I must get some scribing practice ready for my first day at the Imperial palace tomorrow. It'll be an early start, so I have ordered a bowl of roasted chicken for breakfast. I expect that the cook has begun to drown it in vinegar sauce already. Here at Bathhausia, they claim to be 'Rome's most authentic Purrmanian-themed Bath and Spa'. They have been very good to let me have a room but believe me, you can go too far with a theme. I have no clue what the cook put in last night's special – the Black Dumplings of the Forest Worker. They tasted delicious, but this morning I felt sick at the smell of my own breath. I've been eating grass all day.

I dare not risk bear's breath tomorrow, for I must make a good impression. I confess that I am not entirely sure about my new job. If anyone else tells me that 'The Imperial palace is a nest of vipers!' I'll chew my tail off with worry. I plan to keep my mouth shut and my ears open and write everything down in this diary. Luckily, I have got hold of a slightly longer scroll this time, so there is plenty of room for any gossip or palace scandal that I happen to overhear.

## FREEDOM'S PRICE

How is it that I, Spartapuss, was called to work at the Imperial palace? I will begin my tale with yesterday's events. I was pawing the sauce off my cod breakfast when a messenger arrived. He was better dressed than the average messenger and Mewpiter be praised, he did not mark before he entered. With a yawn, he explained that he'd been told to wait while I read the letter and take my reply back to the sender. I had been dreading this for weeks. I don't like arguments, but I am in the middle of a nasty one. It's with Clawdius, the owner of Spatopia - 'Rome's most popular Bath and Spa' according to their advertising. He is a cat of the Imperial Family and he was once my master. When I won my freedom at a Gladiator fight at the Games of Purrcury, Clawdius' first action was to cancel my Spa membership, sending me a short letter saying only: 'Congratulations. Freedom has a high price!'

He was right about that. You have to buy your own food and collars for a start. And don't let the shopkeepers know you're a freedcat because they'll double the price of everything.

For my part, I dearly wish that Clawdius and I could get on like we did before Catligula made him free me at the Games. It is said that you never forget your first master and so against my friends' advice, I wrote to tell him so. A month later, I got a letter back from his wife, Mogullania, with a bill for fifty gold coins. She called it an 'administration fee' for setting me free.

## ALL RIGHT MNIAOW

As I opened the letter, I said a little prayer to Paws. He is known as the God of War but he also does silly disagreements. I was praying that Clawdius would come around to my way of thinking. As soon as the messenger gave me the letter, I knew it was unusual. For one thing, Clawdius never writes on new paper. He has been known to stay up all night long, rubbing out old scrolls so that he can tear them up and use them again, as shopping lists for his wife Mogullania. When I caught a whiff of the scent on the letter, I knew that it was not from Clawdius.

*Spartapuss,*

*Meet me at the Imperial garden at noon. My messenger will show you the way. There is nothing to fear. You will learn something that is very much in your interest.*

*Matro,*

*Captain of The Spraeorian guard*

This was most unexpected. The Spraeorians police the city and guard the Imperial Family. I certainly didn't want to get off on the wrong paw with them.

As I read the letter for the second time, the messenger, who said his name was Mniaow, was busy exploring my bookshelves. When I called to get his attention I startled him and he knocked a bowl from the shelf. It smashed into tiny pieces. Lucky it wasn't a fine one

because, under Bathhausia Rule XIV, the customer must pay for all breakages. I told him that it was all right. I could always ask the cleaners to bury it in their waste pit. Mniaow didn't apologise.

"Well?" he said impatiently. "What is your answer?"

"Oh dear," I said. "I suppose I'd better go with you. But I have no clue what your master can want with me."

"Captain Matro's not my master," said Mniaow.

"I'm sorry," I said. "No offence meant."

"None taken freedcat," he replied. "When offence is taken, you will know it. I'm here on this errand because I owe Matro one. More than one actually. I must have offended Fortune herself! We were playing at mice last night and Captain Matro licked me clean."

"My mother always used to say that 'if you lose at gambling you must be sure to keep on playing until you win it all back'," I said.

Mniaow smiled. For the first time since he arrived he gave me his full attention.

"Thank your mother for that advice," he said. "And since you've asked for mine, you should smarten yourself up a bit. Just because you were once a slave, doesn't mean you have to go wearing that old wooden monstrosity around your neck for the rest of your life. Didn't your mother ever tell you, 'Look the part and you'll get the job'?"

As it happened that was not one of her sayings. There was one about avoiding the job, but I cannot now remember it. Following Mniaow's advice, I took off my wooden collar – the symbol of the freed Gladiator and put it away carefully in its case.

"Now I will dress you for the palace," said Mniaow.

And he began to turn the room upside down looking for the right outfit. Something fell from a box and caught his eye – my golden coin. It was a good luck present from my teacher at gladiatorial school. The gold is Fleagyptian, ancient but still bright. It is the only thing of value that I own.

Mniaow attached it to a simple leather collar and fastened it around my neck.

"Perfect!" he said. "Now you look acceptable." And he stalked off in the direction of the palace.

## THE OLD CAMPAIGNERS

Steps, I hate them. Why the builders insist on putting them everywhere, I do not know. One of the city planners must have got a geometry set for his birthday and amused himself drawing lots of neat squares. From Bathhausia to the Imperial palace is an hour's journey. I am not now as fit as I was after weeks of Gladiator training and I'm ashamed to say that I was puffing by the time we reached the palace gates. After a word with Mniaow, the Spratorians who guard the East Gate opened their oak barrier and let us through. Two of them padded over to escort us towards the Imperial gardens for my meeting with their captain.

The Spratorians are the only soldiers allowed within the city walls, except for the Emperor's Purrmanian Bodyguards. That makes the commander of the Spratorians one of the most powerful cats in all of Rome. I had no clue what he wanted with me.

The first guard coughed and spat. He was a wiry

looking tabby who looked as if his sixteen years of military service were nearly up. Soon he'd be collecting his pension and his cushion of service. He was lean from years on military rations – dried fish and drier biscuits, plus whatever pickings you can loot whilst “on campaign”. But the Spraeorians rarely go on campaign like the other legions. It is their job to police Rome and guard the Emperor, whilst everyone else is off conquering and looting and having fun. Maybe that's why they always look so hard done by.

The second guard sprang at a passing butterfly. Like us, it was making its way towards the Emperor's kitchen garden. It was quite some leap for a small cat. With an accurate swipe, he batted the unfortunate insect to the ground and trod it into the dust without breaking stride. He didn't even bother to stop and eat it. What is it about guards? Is there something about the uniform that attracts the ill-tempered? Our two guards seemed worried about something. I decided that the military life was not for me. Whatever Captain Matro wanted, I would look for a way to say no without getting his hackles up.

## THE BELL

The guards escorted us to a quiet garden, behind the palace kitchens. It was beautifully kept with herbs growing, a private fishpond and vegetables planted in what looked like a tortoise formation. Apparently, the gardener is a retired Spraeorian. At the far end of the garden stands an ancient cedar tree, at the entrance to the Emperor's park.

Later, I learned that this kitchen garden was a favourite spot of the Emperor Augustpuss, who would sleep by the pool and sit up in the tree as night fell, thinking about his great battles in the land of Purrmania and other important matters of state.

It was a peaceful place all right but with each step into the garden, my two escorts became more wary. Although we were still in the palace grounds it was as if they knew they were trespassing on someone else's territory. Without warning, we halted under the big cedar tree and they began to whisper to each other. Mniaow flicked his tail. Then a great crash shook the cedar's branches. I heard snarls. Then the sound of a jangling collar bell, like the sort that the infectious must wear in hospital.

“I'm late for a costume fitting, I must fly,” said Mniaow. He pretended not to hear the bell but of course we all heard it. Something unclean was out there. Without waiting for a reply Mniaow charged back towards the palace. At the same moment, I saw a movement in the bushes ahead of me. An old Spraeorian shot towards us like a javelin. His coat was thick with leaves and his ears were bleeding where they'd been torn by the Emperor's thorn bushes. I heard the ringing again. Someone had hung a brass bell around his neck. The three of us backed away, sniffing the air. I must admit that I have always had a horror of catching a terrible disease, like the mange.

“Purrmanians! Purrmanians! Run lads. They are almost upon us!” shouted the stranger.

## BLACK FOREST CATS HO!

The fierceness of the Purrmanians has passed into legend. Mothers still tell their kittens, 'Behave yourself, or we'll leave you up a tree in the Black Forest for the Purrmanians.' Rome has been at war with the barbarian tribes of Purrmania since history began. No one can remember exactly who started the wars but all here agree that it was the Purrmanians' fault, for straying into our territory. Captives from the wars were brought back to Rome and displayed in great triumphs at the Arena. Romans love a good triumph. Because of their impressive size, some of the Purrmanian fighters who survived the Games were chosen for bodyguard duties. There have been Purrmanians guarding Roman Emperors ever since. Although it is also the Praetorians' job to guard our Emperor, in troubled times nine out of ten Emperors have preferred two lines of defence.

## DOGREN OF PURRMANIA

The escaped prisoner shot up the cedar tree and was soon lost in its green canopy. The two Praetorian guards and I stood rooted to the ground as we watched to see what was coming towards us through the trees.

Despite his great bulk, Dogren of Purrmania didn't crash into the clearing, snapping branches and uprooting small trees with his great paws (which were bigger than serving bowls).

Dogren had been born in the Neuterberger Forest, and he knew how to run fast through the trees without making a noise. His tribe, the Kati, had always

enjoyed sports. Especially sports that involve a lot of physical contact. Their most popular sport was ambushing Roman legions in their dark forest and giving them a good mauling. In fact, the very name of the Neuterberger Forest was enough to put legionaries off their dried biscuits. Not that they needed much putting off on that account.

How the legions ever managed to capture Dogren remains a closely guarded military secret, so there was obviously some trickery involved. The last time I'd seen Dogren was at the gladiatorial school, where he'd been training Furasians for Father Felinius. The Father had named him 'Dogren' because of his size. He looks more dog than cat. The Emperor Tibbles had appointed him head of the Purrmanian Bodyguards after the last candidate had gone mad. The less said about that the better.

His companion was also huge, and also a Purrmanian, for all of the Emperor's Bodyguards come from that land. But he was not from the Kati tribe and had not been born in a forest. The trees shook as he crashed into the clearing, forcing his way through the undergrowth as he ran after his prey.

## COWARD'S WAY

I looked at the Praetorian guards. Would they stand and fight? Or would they take the coward's route and follow their comrade up the tree? The old campaigner looked battle-hardened, but he was lean and wiry. No doubt the Praetorians were well trained, but they were no match for the big Purrmanians. But if Fortune willed it, good sense would prevail. Perhaps the two groups of soldiers

had a healthy respect for each other's traditions? Perhaps they worked in co-operation to keep the Emperor safely guarded at all times? I was about to find out.

"Which way did he go?" asked the big Purrmanian. His Catin was perfect and he had hardly a hint of an accent for he had been born in Rome to Purrmanian parents and he'd lived in the capital all his life.

"What's that Chief?" said the old Spraetorian, pricking up an ear.

"Which way did the prisoner go?" said the Purrmanian.

"Vich vay dit zee prizoner go?" repeated the old Spraetorian in a puzzled voice, tilting his head sideways for good measure. His friend laughed.

"There is a problem with our communication. He does not understand what I am saying Sir," said the Purrmanian.

"He is mocking you," growled Dogren in a voice that would worry sheep.

And he took two paces forward and stuck out a paw the size of a gatepost. It connected and the unfortunate Spraetorian toppled like a falling statue.

## DOGREN OF PURRMANIA

The second Spraetorian thought about it. When there was a fight, his father had always told him to go for the biggest bully. Put the big one down and then you'll win the respect of the rest. He'd also been told to fight with street-rules. Forget squaring up to your opponent and all of that 'I challenge you to a fight!' nonsense that you see in the theatre. Just make sure you get the

first blow in. Bite them where it'll make their eyes water, or better still, go for their eyes. So the Spraetorian padded straight up to Dogren and sprang, claws reaching for the eyes.

Dogren smiled. He had won over two hundred fights before his retirement from the Arena. During this time, he'd seen the fashions come and go. There had been pitched battles, death matches and free-fur-alls. Female against male, water fights and killing in costumes. Dogren had seen every attack in the book. He'd seen so many attacks, in fact, that he'd rewritten the book and published a new version of it. Sometimes, he used to entertain his friends by reading aloud out from it at parties in his deep growling voice. Some of his friends had bought two or three copies each.

As the Spraetorian sprang towards him, Dogren knew that he was under attack from a quickly improvised combination of the 'Surprise spring' (move XIII) and an aggressive lunge (move IV) 'Claws to the eyes'.

He had to give his Spraetorian opponent some credit for bravery. It was just a shame that it was combined with so much stupidity. With a swift turn Dogren shifted his considerable weight onto his left paw and swung his great body around. This sent the unfortunate Spraetorian flying over his shoulder. He smacked into the trunk of the great cedar tree. The tree shook to its roots. A strange ringing sound came from a spot somewhere high in the branches. Dogren's eyes wandered up the trunk of the great tree. There was nothing to see, save for a cloud of branches

covered in dark green needles. Seizing his chance, the Spraeorian remembered his father's other piece of advice and ran off towards the palace, as fast as Purrcury's fiery chariot. His old friend, who had only just regained consciousness - ran after him.

## I, CLIMBER

The two Purrmans stood staring up at the cedar tree. The trunk was huge, but the branches in the middle looked rather thin. A thought occurred to me. The Emperor's Bodyguards didn't look like born climbers. Dogren had been an accomplished tree climber in his youth, in the Neuterberger Forest. But by the time he was just two years old, he was already getting too heavy. As Fortune spun it, his tribe of the Katimungus had an arrangement with another tribe - the Scati, who would do all their difficult climbing for them in return for protection. The Scati were smaller and more agile. They'd go up the trees and flush out the prey, whilst the big Katimungus bruisers waited below, sharpening their claws. The two Purrmans turned towards me. For Peus' sake! I thought. I knew what was coming next.

"Climb the tree and we will give you gold," said the first Purrmans, whose name was Wulf.

I played for time.

"Er, I'm not sure about that. I'm not very brave. What crime did the prisoner commit?"

"He said that he was after songbirds in the Emperor's garden but there are unanswered questions. His story may be false, so we must ask him some more questions before we can come to the correct decision,"

said Wulf, who was an open-minded cat.

"He is a spy!" growled Dogren, "An assassin, after the Emperor!"

And he wondered what they were teaching them on Bodyguards training these days. Wulf would believe everything anyone told him. Spies and assassins weren't going to hold their paws up and shout 'In the name of Mewpiter, I confess my crimes!' were they?

"A spy!" I gasped, sounding terrified, which was easy.

"He sounds dangerous. He's probably armed."

"He is armed only with a little knife. Get him to come down and we will do the rest. We have practised operations like this many times in training. Do not be afraid, there is nothing to fear," said Wulf.

Dogren sighed and gave Wulf a hard stare. "There is nothing to fear!" he said to himself in a furious voice. How in the name of Klaw the Terrible was Wulf going to force me to climb the tree if I had nothing to fear?

"I'd love to help, except I've got a medical problem," I said. "Weak paws you see and a nasty case of lock claw. I'm not good at climbing difficult trees like this. Hiding in bushes would be a different matter. But I could go and find a long ladder for you. I'm sure there'll be one in the kitchen."

"You will climb now!" ordered Dogren in a voice that was usually obeyed.

"I, Dogren, have spoken my word," he added.

"And once he has spoken his word, he will not speak it again," said Wulf, in support of his commander. Dogren sighed again.