

# DIE CLAUDIUS

ROBIN PRICE

MÖGZILLA

## MAIUS XXVI

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May 26th

*Ship's log*

**T**HIS IS THE CHRONICLE of Spartapuss, most miserable of cats. I am on board The Stroker, most miserable of ships, headed for the land of my birth. I am told that it is a perfect place to be miserable in, for it is the land closest to the Land of the Dead. How I am sick of the sea. And I am sick of the wailing of the seagulls. Blow wind, and crack their beaks! Blow us onwards, to the land of my miserable ancestors.

## MAIUS XXVII

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May 27th

**T**here is no wind. The ship drifts on a sea as flat as a rabbit pancake. The sailors are growling that we could be stuck here for days. Old Kat has them constantly busy cleaning the ship and mending ropes – otherwise they would have their thieving paws all over our luggage by now, no doubt. As there is nothing else to do I shall record the cruel events that brought me to this place. I shall no longer ask the Goddess Fortune for help, as she has abandoned me.

## THE LETTER

To help the hours to pass faster on this lonely ship, I will tell how I came to this place. All wars, great or small, have to start somewhere. The ones that I have read about usually start with a small detail, the sort of thing that old professors like to use to amuse their students with. This war began with a letter.

*To the idiot Clawdius,*

*Give us back the WOMPS that the traitor Vericat stole from us. Do as I command or things will go very badly for you.*

*Yours with spite,*

*Todimpuss, King of all the Kitons.*

“Womps?” asked the Emperor Clawdius, with a half hiss.

“Weapons, Caesar,” began Narkittus, who was usually ready with an answer before his Emperor had finished the question.

“W.O.M.P. stands for Weapon of Magical Power, Caesar,” explained General Mawlus.

Narkittus may be the Emperor’s most trusted adviser (which isn’t saying much) but he was an ex-slave and not even a Roman. The General wasn’t going to listen to another of his lectures.

“Weapons of Mewidic power,” corrected Narkittus.

The General let out a hiss. He had come straight from the Senate where Rome’s most important citizens were already gossiping about the rude letter from the terrible Kiton King. The letter was supposed to be top secret, but tongues at the Palace grow looser with each day of Clawdius’s rule. “The Senate is agreed Caesar,” said Mawlus, ignoring Narkittus. “The Kitons must pay dearly for this insult. I have three legions ready for an invasion, but if a fourth could be spared, it would speed our victory.”

Clawdius’s thin whiskers twitched as he read the letter again. A slave came forward with a bowl of his favourite chicken with oyster and wild mushroom sauce and he passed it to the Imperial Taster to check for poison. I thought at that time what a marvellous job the tasters have. They get to sample every scrap of food or drop of drink that passes the Emperor’s lips - Rome has never known an Emperor that ate badly. I even applied for such a job myself once but the head cook said I do not have the right nose for it. During the test I passed a bowl of baked cod as fit to eat, mistaking the smell of a deadly poison for a touch too much black pepper in the oyster sauce.

General Mawlus couldn’t stand it any longer. He began to flick his tail in open impatience.

“What shall we tell the Senate, Caesar?”

Clawdius studied the letter and without looking up asked:

“What would you have me do Narkittus? The Kitons are a lot of hot heads. These Womps are obviously very important to them. Have you thought about giving them back?”

“Giving them back?” spat the General, bristling.

I must confess that I have never liked Narkittus. He is always sniffing around the Emperor looking for a way to make himself more powerful. It is said that he has more influence over Clawdius than any wife! But this idea was daring even by his standards.

“Rome has never been poorer. Catligula spent a fortune, four fortunes in fact, before you became Emperor,” said Narkittus. “We cannot afford a costly foreign war unless there is treasure, but the only thing in that miserable land you are sure to return with is a cold.”

Before General Mawlus could answer, there was a terrible scream. The taster fell upon his face and clutched his stomach. Something was wrong with the chicken.

“D-d-d-doctor!” spluttered the Emperor.

The rest of the room took up the shout. Where were the doctors when you needed them? There was a General wailing and scratching of claws upon the floor tiles.

“Is Caesar ill? Did he touch the meat?” said General Mawlus, without panic.

“Not for me – for the t-taster” said Clawdius.

“Trust us Caesar, we will do everything in our power to save his life,” said a doctor who had just arrived.

“N-Never mind his life. Find out about the poison. Who did this? I must know,” said Clawdius.

Long months of training meant that he had almost cured his stutter, except in times of extreme excitement like this.

“What about the Kitons, Caesar?” asked Mawlus.

“Write back to the Kitons. Remind them that I am the Roman Emperor. And say I am n-not used to being insulted like that.”

And so it seemed that Fortune smiled upon the Kitons, for Clawdius had given them a second chance. We heard no more of the matter for two months. Then the Emperor received a second letter.

*To the idiot Clawdius,*

*You are a liar, as well as a fool. You are used to being insulted. It is said that your own family call you a half-wit and a weakling.*

*Give us back our Womps, or you will DIE  
C-C-CLAWDIUS.*

*Yours with more spite,*

*Todimpuss, King of all the Kitons*

And with that the matter was as good as settled. The invasion of the Land of the Kitons was the talk of the city. Which Generals would the Emperor send? There were triumphs to be won. Official triumphs are only awarded to Generals lucky enough to prove how brave they were by leading their armies into battle on foreign soil. You get to dress up in a purple collar and parade around the Arena in a chariot with everyone cheering and throwing fish at you. There is no greater honour in public life, as everyone knows.

## THE CALL UP

The next day I was surprised to find myself summoned to the Palace. I arrived late at the doors of the Emperor's private apartments, bristling after an argument with the Praetorians at the gate. They did not recognise me. It is many weeks since I have been called to the Palace, although I still draw my scribe's salary. The reason is that Narkittus, the Emperor's adviser, has introduced his own scribes who can write good letters in both Catin and his native Squeak. It seems that I am no longer needed. I was stung by this silence, for I knew our Emperor when he was plain Clawdius, owner of a bathhouse. I saved his life once so he sometimes used to look to me for advice. Well not 'look to me' exactly but I used to give him advice whether he asked for it or not. But now it seems that I am not needed. For Narkittus has got his claws in everything at the

Palace. It is said that he has Clawdius on a short lead and haunts his every step.

I padded into the room to find Clawdius sitting on his cushioned throne and next to him were General Mawlus and Vespurrisian – one of the General's more promising young officers. Narkittus was there (of course) with his many servants waiting on his every word. Clawdius was in a state of nervous excitement and struggled to get his words out properly. They had been discussing Womps. It was the first time I had heard the word and I confess that at the time I had no clue what they were talking about. Clawdius's grey eyes flickered and his tail began to twitch in annoyance.

"Magical weapons? No one in their right mind believes in that!" laughed Vespurrisian.

Clawdius said nothing. Vespurrisian did not know Clawdius as I did. Our Emperor was most superstitious and clearly believed in magical weapons.

"We will do as you command Caesar," said General Mawlus, softening his voice, "but please take the advice of an old soldier. Your place is here, in Rome."

"I am g-going," said Clawdius.

"But the Land of the Kitons is a land full of dangers," growled the General.

"That's why I'm sending Narkittus along first, to make arrangements for my arrival," said Clawdius.

"You want to take this Squeak freedcat?" hissed General Mawlus, bristling. "That will not be

necessary, Caesar. Soldiering usually is best left to the Generals.”

“Who usually leave it to the soldiers,” said Narkittus under his breath.

“Here is a letter. It is signed by a hundred of our most experienced Senators, all begging you to stay in Rome,” said Mawlus, trying a final appeal.

“That settles it. I’m c-c-coming,” said Clawdius. “My wife is right. Leading the invasion is the only way to get my enemies in the Senate to take me seriously.”

Narkittus looked pleased at this. For a moment I wondered if he and Clawdius’s wife had come up with the whole idea together. There have been three plots to kill him already, and it is said that she is behind two of them for sure.

“Great Caesar...” began Mawlus.

“Enough!” said Clawdius. “Narkittus will go with you and prepare for my arrival. I can’t have General Mawlus - my military genius, c-c-conquering the best bits of the land and grabbing all the glory before I arrive, c-can I?”

Clawdius often spoke the truth, as if it was a joke. It was a habit he had learned from Catligula.

“Officers, you have your orders,” said Narkittus with a smile.

Clawdius waved them off. I was padding towards the door, thinking about dinner when Narkittus said:

“Not you Spartapuss. You can stay.”

I do not know how, but Narkittus had persuaded the Emperor that I must accompany him to the Land of the Kitons. Worse still, I was to go in the very first ship of the invasion fleet. Suspecting that this was Narkittus’s plan to get rid of me, I knew that I must beg the Emperor to change his mind. Although my life depended on it, my tongue was tied in knots.

“It is a dark land, full of dangerous barbarians,” I protested.

“Yes,” said Clawdius.

“It is said that they have magic weapons,” I gasped, “and no underfloor heating,” I added.

“It is worse than that,” said Narkittus. “The Land of the Kitons is a backward land full of wild tribes who hate each other even more than they hate Rome. It is ruled by savage kings who spit hatred and wage bloody wars over small matters like garden fences and fishing rights. It is a roadless, charmless, hopeless wasteland, with tasteless food.”

Now I have no great love for the Land of the Kitons – although I was born there. I have never set paw in that unhappy place since I was a kitten. But to hear Narkittus listing so many bad things about it made me bristle. I tried to think of some clever reply, but all I could say was:

“I hear that the food is not so bad when you get used to it.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to get used to it,” said Narkittus.