

# I AM SPARTAPUSS

ROBIN PRICE

MÖGZILLA

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First published by Mogzilla in 2004

ISBN 09546576 24

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Cover layout and typesetting: Surface Impression

Copy editor: Annabel Else

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Printed in England by Antony Rowe Ltd

The author would like to thank the following people (and their friends) for all of their help and encouragement:

Michele, Peter, Hayley, Sam, Phil, Annabel, Rupert, Nick, Ricky, John G, Sinc, Andrew, Bev, Les, Kirsty, Claire E, Twiz, Ed, Arvind, Tanuja, Bernard, Jon, Olivia, Am, Ben, David, Mum and Dad, Nicole, Catherine B, Nicholas R, Guy G, Robert S, Caroline C and Rupert.

*For Michele...*

# DRAMATIS PAWSONAE

Who's who!

Rome AD 36.

The Feline Empire rules the known world

## **Cats of the Imperial family:**

**Tiberius** – The Emperor. Nickname: ‘Tibbles’

**Mewlia** – The Emperor’s aging mother

**‘Catligula’** – Mewlia’s great-grandson. Real name Gattus Tiberius. Spoilt from the litter!

**Clawdius** – Catligula’s uncle (and Mewlia’s grandson). Owner of Spatopia, ‘Rome’s Finest Bath and Spa’

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

**Spartapuss** – a Kitton slave. Manager of Spatopia

**Saucus** – a soothsayer

**Cursus** – a curse carver

**Katrin** – a cook

**Cleocatra** – a cleaner

**Brutia** – a dog. Head of the Imperial bodyguard

**Russell** – a crow. A good friend of Spartapuss

There’s more at [www.spartapuss.com](http://www.spartapuss.com)

THIS IS THE DIA RY OF  
SPAR TA PUSS

DO NOT READ WHAT IS  
RITTEN HERE, OR THE GODESS  
WILL TAKE A TERRA BULL RE  
VENGE ON YOU.

I, CURSUS ROTE THIS

## PAWS XVI

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March 16th

I AM SPARTAPUSS and this is my diary. I'm new to history but I intend to take pen in paw and write an entry every day after I have made my evening rounds.

As I write, I look out upon Spatopia. It is dark now, so I shall have to leave the description of my place of work until the light is better. It has been my home for more years than I care to remember. It is said that all cats that bathe have bathed in Spatopia waters, but quite a few flea-ridden barbarians who have never dipped a paw in water, also come here when we have 'All you can eat' fish bowls on the menu.

Here at the spa, we look after all Roman cats. From the humble rat-catcher to the noble senator, from the gladiator to the Praetorian guard. Everything that I see I shall put down in my diary. I promise to leave no scent un-sniffed. I am not one for gossip but we live in scandalous times, so I fear that a little scandalous writing cannot be avoided. Luckily, I have got hold of a good long scroll, so I'll have plenty of room to get down all the details.

## PAWS XVII

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March 17th

### *Why Have a Dog and Bark Yourself?*

THIS MORNING I had to keep a low profile because Clawdus was in a strange mood again. He would not come away from his scratching post, even though Katrin did him a nice fat dormouse for his breakfast. As I padded past him low to the ground, so as not to cause offence, he called me over for a word in private. With a gulp from the throat that made him sound as if he was coughing up a fur ball, he said that he had been up all night going over the accounts. Last week we sold only five lunches at full price. He ordered me to go around reminding our customers that Spatopia, Rome's Finest Bath and Spa, is famous for its 'legendary lunches'.

As usual, I carried out Clawdus' orders, but I cannot understand why he doesn't leave the running of the spa to me and the rest of his slaves. 'Why have a dog and bark yourself?' as I always say (but not to our canine friends, as they may take offence). Clawdus will not listen. But I know the customers far better than my master. They don't come here because of his connections to the Imperial family. They're only here because of our new offer of a daily powdering and brushing for gold members. The flea

epidemic in the East quarter is still terrible. And as for our food, it is more legionary than legendary. Our 'All you can eat' fish bowls are the only thing on the menu that draw the crowds. But most of the customers are the sort of strays that Clawdus says do not belong in an exclusive spa like ours.

Now I must leave my writing and make my way to the kitchen for I smell the spiced chicken roasting and soon it will be in my bowl.

## PAWS XVIII

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March 18th

### *A Foul Deed in the Vomitorium*

NOT A GOOD SLEEP last night. A great white goat chased me from dream to dream and I awoke on the window cushion in a panic, instead of in my basket. Then, on my morning rounds, I made a terrible discovery. Someone had scrawled a poem on the wall of the vomitorium and I have copied it out. You could not miss it, it was just above the tidemarks from last week's feast.

*The Emperor Tiberius ruled all of Rome,  
Until he went fishing and never came home,  
And Mewlia sat there behind the great throne,  
Picking and licking away at his bones.*

I rubbed this graffiti off the wall immediately. All verses upon the theme of the Imperial family were outlawed many years ago, by the Emperor Augustpuss, who hated jokes. If this verse was discovered, it would cause a scandal. The writer would wake up one cold night, gazing at the stars, banished to some tiny island at the back end of the Empire. And Clawdius would be in serious trouble for having it on his wall.

## PAWS XIX

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March 19th

### *An Ugly Old Tongue*

**N**O MORE GRAFFITI to report today but the meaning of the poem is unclear. What can be the likelihood of the Emperor quitting Rome and leaving the cushioned throne to his old mother? I have seen some bad things written about Mewlia but this seems a very odd thing to make up. I confess that I'm nervous, even of writing about the graffiti here in my diary, because there are so many loose tongues around the spa. So, to guard this diary's secrets, I have decided that I shall write it in the language of my homeland. For no Roman will learn to speak Kittish, the language of my tribe the Kittons. Romans call Kittish 'the ugliest tongue you'll ever hear'. It is

commonly held that we Kittons live just one day's sail away from the Land of the Dead. Clawdius says this explains our primitive language and our taste in food.

It has been a long time since I spoke Kittish for I made the journey here when I was small, with my eyes only just opened. But tonight I shall clear the fur from my brain and try to remember as much of my native tongue as I can. Tomorrow, I shall write down a list of suspects who may have scrawled the graffiti verses in the vomitorium. If I write everything in Kittish, no one will be in trouble if this diary is discovered.

## PAWS XX

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March 20th

### *Miaow*

**M**IAA00OW miaa00owoo miaa00ow miaa00ow  
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In Mewpiter's name, Kittish is not a good language for writing things down! This is going to take an age. I shall just have to risk writing it plainly in Catin as before. But that is enough writing for today, as I can smell fish roasting and soon it will be in my bowl.

## PAWS XXI

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March 21st

### *Some Unusual Suspects*

THERE IS STILL NO CLUE as to the identity of the graffiti scrawler. Whoever wrote the verses must be someone who likes poems and dislikes the Emperor's mother. Mewpiter knows, the list could be a long one!

The vomitorium is kept locked except on 'All you can eat' fish days. These bring in all the strays from here to Fleagyp. It's great for business, but it's not a pretty sight to see them stuffing their guts with cheap fish. When they've had their fill, they rush to the vomitorium to sick it all up and then race back into line for their seconds, thirds and fourths.

When the graffiti verse was written, the vomitorium door should have been locked. But there are a few members of staff who could get their paws on a key:

### I **Cursus the curse carver**

Not a likely suspect, as he can't spell and is not interested in politics or poetry. He's not interested in anything apart from gladiators, games, carving curses and vermin control.

Note: don't ever get him talking about vermin in front of customers again, as he will never shut up.

### II **Saucus the soothsayer**

A cat of letters and he has written poems before, but he's a great defender of the Imperial family and knows better than to write bad things about Clawdius' grandmother.

### III **Russell**

He could be a suspect as he has strange views on the Imperial family, especially for a crow, but he was roosting in his cedar near Paws Field that afternoon.

### IV **Katrin**

Coming from Purrmania, she can't read or write much Catin, except for the odd recipes. Surely not Katrin?

### V **Cleocatra the cleaner**

Not Cleocatra either, for she hates graffiti. And she usually has to clean it off...

Enough writing, for I hear Clawdius at his scratching post. So far he hasn't found out about the graffiti.

## PAWS XXII

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March 22nd

### *Why Clawdius?*

TODAY CLAUDIUS was being very unreasonable. He is impossible to please sometimes. He threw a vase full of cold water at me to rouse me from my cushion and complained about the noise. Apparently some wild beasts have taken up residence outside our gates. He said that their howling was particularly bad this afternoon. I told him that it is no use ordering me to go out there and evict them, for they are on the other side of our wall. They are on the public road and not on our property, so he should call the Sprætorian guard and get them to do something about it. I confess that I'm afraid to approach these beasts as they are bigger than me – and wilder! As for the graffiti – no more clues as yet, but I will have to keep my eye on the staff.

## PAWS XXIII

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March 23rd

### *The Slyness of the Beasts*

THE NOISE from the wild beasts is getting worse. There was a terrible row this morning. I think they were having an argument about sleeping places. Russell said he'd had a word with one of them, a wolf I believe, who denied all knowledge of it. They disturbed Clawdius from his nap. Our customers might make fun of his speech, but there is certainly nothing wrong with his hearing. He instructed me to have his basket moved to the opposite side of the courtyard, so as to avoid the dreadful racket. Funny that he didn't mention the smell.

And more ill news: my diary is supposed to be a secret but already half the spa is congratulating me on my new hobby as a 'cat of letters'. I have had many offers of help from a number of customers who have offered to advise me about the art of writing.

## PAWS XXIV

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March 24th

### *Pawed by an Angry Crowd*

THERE ARE TOO MANY loose tongues in this spa. News of our graffiti artist, whom everyone is now calling The Vomitorium Scrawler, or V.S., is travelling fast. Today I was cornered by a crowd of customers with questions about the exact wording of the graffiti verses. I told them that it would be treason to talk about the graffiti and besides, the verses are far too rude to repeat in polite company. But the crowd followed me on my rounds all around the spa. Eventually, I asked them to tell me what they thought the graffiti poem said, so that I could tell them whether they had got it right or not. I sat through seven versions of the scrawler's poem, each one far worse than the real one. According to Saucus the soothsayer, three of these were very well written.

Speaking of which, having considered the many kind offers about ways to improve my writing, I have decided to follow the advice of Saucus. I am now determined to read as little as possible so that my work will not be corrupted with the style of other writers, especially the ancient Squeaks. They are without doubt the worst writers in history, according

to Saucus, as they always ignore the true facts for the sake of an exciting story. Saucus gave me one more piece of advice. On no account should I ever think before writing things down, for if thoughts hang around the brain too long they must surely come out rotten. I shall start now with a description of Clawdius, my master here at Spatopia.

### *Clawdius*

His fur is grey. It is not as thick as it used to be, especially on his left leg where he will keep scratching the same patch. He walks with an unusual roll, as if his back legs do not know where his front legs are going. He has walked like this since birth. His speech is also strange. Saucus says that he was born at a time when the pawtents were bad and that the gods made him walk and talk like a fool. They did this in order to punish his mother for not honouring them with the right sacrifices. It is true that his was a difficult birth and his own mother was surprised that he lasted past the first week. But Katrin believes that he speaks strangely because he has an exceptionally large tongue, which is too big for his mouth. She says that he dribbles all over his pillow at night and has shown me the said pillow in evidence and it was badly stained. But he has quick eyes for a cat thought by all Rome to be a fool. Even today he caught a couple of strays selling brushes they'd

stolen from us on a stall in the market. And there was no hesitation in his speech when he called for the Praetorian guard to arrest them.

## PAWS XXVIII

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March 28th

### *The Scrawler Strikes Again*

ALL NEWS. The Vomitorium Scrawler has struck again. I discovered a new verse this morning written in the same place as before. The writing was shaky. Perhaps even shakier than the last time, and strangely familiar too!

*Mice run the empire, the Senate are rats,  
Mewlia acts like she's Queen of the Cats.*

This time it was signed 'V.S.'.

This was clearly worse than the first poem and took longer to scrub off. But luckily Cleocatra the cleaner was near and I asked her to assist me. Clawdus would climb the city walls if he knew about this!

If lines about Mewlia being queen of the cats were discovered in this spa, the poet would most likely get sewn into a sack full of rats and thrown into the river.

I doubt if I shall get a good night's sleep tonight, what with all the worry. Last night I remember that the same terrible white goat chased me from dream to dream and I pray that it will not come back again for its horns looked very sharp. I fear I may have overeaten as it was a lovely dinner of my favourite spiced chicken, which Katrin roasted to blackened perfection.

## PAWS XXIX

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March 29th

### *The Bodyguards*

THIS AFTERNOON Brutia came charging through the gates accompanied by the Emperor's Purrmanian bodyguards, who were shouting, 'We've come for Clawdus! We've come for Clawdus!'

For a dreadful moment, I was as a frightened rabbit in front of a pack of hounds. I feared that someone had told them about the Vomitorium Scrawler and they'd come to arrest Clawdus. But, the goddess be thanked, Brutia had only come to complain about the noise from the wild beasts.

Brutia is the kind of dog that seizes her problems by the throat and shakes them. I circled her a few times and then tried to explain that Clawdus was busy with important business. I added that there

was little we could do about what goes on outside the spa walls.

She called me a stinking flea-ridden, mangy Kitton slave.

That is a lie, I am most particular about my coat.

Then she gave me a nasty nip on the tail, and threatened to rip it off for a duster if her evening bath was ever interrupted again. I said nothing but offered her a complimentary biscuit. I have been trained to agree with the customers as frequently as possible and cross them in nothing. I am especially inclined to agree with this customer as she is in command of the Imperial bodyguards. Most of them are big Purrmanians, captured in the wars in the Neuterberger forest. They are sworn to defend the Emperor with their lives. They're bred for their loyalty, unlike the Spraetorian guards, who'll usually bend the rules for the price of a nice piece of fish.

When she'd gone, Cursus told me it was no use complaining. Apparently she likes arguments, and she always wins! Luckily, Clawdius wasn't around when this was going on but I fear that he must have heard about it and it may have put him off his lunch. Katrin took a full bowl of roasted dormouse up to his room but he didn't even sniff at it. There was hardly a paw-mark on it, so we shared it for our dinner. Katrin says he's often picky with his food. She kindly bandaged my bitten tail and I shall

dip it in the Sacred Spring if it has not improved by tomorrow morning.

## PAWS XXX

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March 30th

### *More Beastly Behaviour*

TODAY WE APPROACHED the wild beasts to complain about the noise. Russell agreed to be my interpreter. He speaks many languages and has something of a way with the wild ones. He was late flying from his roost at Paws Field and I was about to go back inside when I spotted him swooping in from the East. He made reasonable work of his landing: I think he must have been practising.

Russell told me that these wild beasts are good types for the most part – if a little bit overenthusiastic sometimes. Their camp spreads halfway down the street and the noise they make is considerable, especially during the afternoon. The stench they give off is dreadful – it came creeping under the wall today and put the customers off their seafood stew. The bears are the worst offenders, but the wolves and tigers could also do with a wash.

We approached with caution. Russell flew over and got their attention first. He has a marvellous voice for public speaking so I gave him the list of