

Begrudging Silence
A Puss in Boots Short Story
By K. M. Shea

“This silence will drive me to *madness*! I am a creature of genius ideas; I am not meant to be silenced,” Puss wailed the moment Gabrielle shut the door to her bedroom.

“Then talk,” Gabrielle said.

“No, I must refrain, for your safety,” Puss said, rubbing against her skirts in a moment of rare affection. He sauntered away before Gabrielle could scratch under his chin. “I took a vow I would not speak in Castle Brandis until I can be assured that there is no threat to your life.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but are you sure it’s really necessary? The only thing you’ve accomplished so far is to get crabby because you can’t correct Steffen and his brothers when you think they’ve said something wrong,” Gabrielle said, throwing herself onto her bed.

Puss joined her and curled up near her head. “I am certain. My abilities are best kept a secret, for now. The current events of the continent have done nothing to relieve my worries.”

“It’s only going to get worse after the wedding, when we’ll be spending most of our time here in Castle Brandis instead of in Carabas,” Gabrielle carefully said.

“In the span of two seasons, Lord Enchanter Evariste was captured; Queen Ingrid passed away; Erlauf invaded and took over Trieux, and a Loire prince was cursed. Such a string of calamities and tragedies is not to be taken lightly, and I refuse to allow something similar happen to you,” Puss said.

“I don’t think it’s likely anyone would try to curse *me*,” Gabrielle wryly said.

“You are soon to be a princess—and the future Queen of Arcainia. If anyone was stupid enough to use black magic in the borders of Arcainia, your husband’s family would be the prime target,” Puss said.

“You’re right, but I don’t like it.”

“You don’t like the idea of facing evil?”

“Not particularly, but I know we could handle it. What I was referring to was your forced vow of silence.”

“If my silence proves to be useful and allows us to catch an enemy off-guard, it will be worth the price,” Puss said.

“If it makes you feel any better, I am *not* enjoying all the skirts and dresses I have to wear now,” Gabrielle sighed.

“No, it does not, in fact, make me feel any better! Being shackled with skirts is hardly comparable to keeping such a bright and innovative companion, like me, silent.”

Gabrielle ignored his complaint and shifted her heavy skirts. “You think skirts would be nice to wear in the winter as they would provide a lot of extra warmth, but they’re still so stifling. Maybe we should move up our return to Carabas.”

There was a knock on the door. “Gabi?”

Gabrielle slid off her bed with a smile. “Come in, Steffen.”

Steffen slipped inside the bedroom. “How are you two holding up?” he asked.

“Sufficiently enough,” Puss said, civil—for once—to the prince.

“Why?” Gabrielle asked.

“I thought the cat was going to blow his top when Erick and Rune were discussing mages and the practicalities of magic,” Steffen said dryly.

“Your brothers’ bumbling conversation was the equivalent of a toddler playing with wooden toys,” Puss said.

“Puss, try to be civil,” Gabrielle scolded.

“I would *try* if they did not have the same grasp of magic as a five-year-old!”

Gabrielle turned to her fiancé. “I apologize, he’s a little testy from his vow of silence.”

“I am not!”

Steffen raised his eyebrows. “A little?”

“It’s hard on him.”

“I know. It’s the only reason why I haven’t yanked his tail, yet.” Steffen eyed Puss.

“Do not entertain such an idea, Bumpkin head, or you shall regret it,” Puss warned.

“Your threats just may make me forget to extend to you an invitation,” Steffen said.

“For?” Puss demanded.

“Tea. Father was wondering if you would like to join him in his private study. He was hoping to speak with you for an hour or two.”

“If King Henrik wishes to speak with me, I suppose it would be rude to decline,” Puss said. He leaped from the bed and sauntered towards the door. “Though I will not often be so easily bought off. It is only because I wish to tell him of the mistakes in the conversation Prince Erick and Prince Rune held. Thank you.” He slipped through the door when Gabrielle opened it for him, his tail curling in a question mark as he trotted down the hallway.

“I hope he decides to break his vow of silence soon. It’s not fair to him,” Gabrielle sighed.

“I’m more concerned that he has persistently clung to it,” Steffen said grimly.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not a good sign. If he wasn’t deeply concerned, he would have tossed the idea aside and held a lecture at the university by now.” His brow wrinkled with concern as he thoughtfully stared at the door through which Puss had made his exit.

“It was kind of your Father to ask him to tea,” Gabrielle said, keeping the door propped open for propriety’s sake. “I’ve brought my lady’s maid, Gerlinde, to Brandis with me so Puss can speak to her as well, but I don’t think he finds her conversation particularly captivating.”

“He’s doing a kind thing for you. Asking Father to entertain him is a small gift—particularly because Father enjoys his company.”

“Your father is wonderful,” Gabrielle said, letting Steffen draw her into an embrace.

“*You* are wonderful.” He kissed her brow and held her close. “You aren’t regretting that you agreed to marry me, are you?”

“No. I like your family.”

“But you’ll have new responsibilities. Being royal will change your role,” Steffen said.

“Some,” Gabrielle agreed. “But I’ll still have opportunities to go adventuring. The biggest irritation is I will now be something I always vowed I would not become.”

“What?”

“A decoration,” she said dryly. “I can see already that the ambassadors and some of the nobles expect me to have the intelligence of a chicken.”

“You’ll show them.”

“Someday. For now, I think I will follow Puss’s example and hide my abilities. I would rather play the role they expect me to fill for a few years while your Father is still ruling before I try anything.”

“Why?”

“One of the many things I’ve learned while adventuring is that there is great importance in scout work. During the next few years, nobles will likely see me as an ornament. In the meantime, I can collect data on them and learn of their goals and their weaknesses.”

Steffen chuckled. “You are ruthless.”

“Maybe,” Gabrielle grinned. “But I want to be a good princess.”

“You will be,” Steffen promised. He slid a hand under her chin so he could tilt her face and kiss her. “I wish we had decided on a winter wedding,” he sighed.

“Elise said Arcainia’s economy would further prosper from a spring wedding,” Gabrielle said.

Steffen grumbled.

“Come, let’s walk the gardens,” Gabrielle said with an amused smile.

“As you wish,” he sighed.

Gabrielle chuckled and briefly kissed him. “We’ll have the rest of our lives together, Steffen. I think you can last until spring.” She detangled herself from his grasp and slipped out of the room.

“You know that, and I know that, but some of my idiot subjects seem to hope our pending marriage is rather precarious.”

“I haven’t received any catty treatment from any ladies,” Gabrielle said as they walked arm in arm down the hallway.

“I wasn’t talking about the ladies; I was talking about the *men*.”

“What?” Gabrielle blinked.

“Haven’t you seen the way Lord Lanzo looks at you?”

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t notice anyone besides you, Steffen,” Gabrielle said, a smile playing at her lips and affection brightening her eyes.

Steffen stopped walking and gave her an admiring look. “Oh, you are good. Did the cat teach you that?”

“He might have given me a lesson or two—to be used strictly for information gathering, you know.”

“I know I like to underestimate him because he’s so *annoying*, but I have to say he is a smart one.”

“He’ll be happy to hear you’ve said so.”

“Don’t *tell* him. He’ll be insufferable!”

Gabrielle laughed as they strolled along.

Across the castle, Puss sat with the King of Arcainia and lapped tea out of a saucer.

“How goes the silence, Master Roland?” King Henrik asked as he ate a plum-filled dumpling.

Puss licked his chops. “Enlightening as usual.”

“What news do you bring this time?”

“Did you know some Arcainian nobles and most of the foreign ambassadors believe that Steffen and Gabrielle’s marriage is all a political move?”

“What? How would they come to that conclusion? Your mistress has my son wrapped around her little finger.”

“They believe it is all a ruse constructed by you in order to bring Carabas back into Arcainia.”

“Poppycock,” King Henrik snorted.

“It is quite foolish,” Puss admitted. “But it is good to know that means many will underestimate Gabrielle’s abilities.”

“I suppose so. What else have you learned?”

“The Baroness of Oker is hoping to snag young Prince Gerhart for one of her daughters.”

“Gerhart is still a boy!” King Henrik objected.

“Perhaps, but one must never fail to keep an eye on scheming mothers.”

“It is a shame you do not wish to reveal you can talk. Mikk would make you one of his sneaks in a heartbeat.”

Puss groomed his whiskers. “It is an idea for the future. I imagine Gabrielle would like to do some scout work as well.”

“We shall see what the future holds for us. In the meantime, tell me more.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

The End