

The Resistance Fighters
A Puss in Boots short story
By K. M. Shea

After the return of the seven princes of Arcainia and Fürstin Elise, it was generally beheld that Steffen could not abide to have Princess Gabrielle out of his sight. As such, no one was surprised that when Gabrielle was called to King Henrik three days after their return, Steffen tagged along.

Puss flattened his ears and glared at Steffen over Gabrielle's head. "Is your accessory truly necessary, Mistress?"

"Yes," Steffen said, holding fast to Gabrielle's hand.

Gabrielle entered the throne room, shivering for a moment in memory of the foul woman who had occupied the room mere days prior. "Enough, Puss."

Puss crouched low on her shoulder, his claws prickling her through the fabric of her leather jerkin—with so much work to be done, she hadn't yet returned to dresses and skirts—and spoke directly into her ear. "I find myself in the uncomfortable position of, for the first time in my acquaintance with your bumpkin-headed husband, thinking of sparing him. Do you really think it is *wise* for him to be here?"

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle asked as the doorkeeper, Arthur, shouted their arrival.

"King Henrik is surely calling you here to hear of what we did during his...convalescence." Puss bumped her ear with his nose as he whispered. "When the bumpkin hears of everything we've done—of everything *you* endured—it will not do him any good."

The amount of care and concern in Puss's smooth voice was alarming. Rarely did her magic cat have anything nice to say about Steffen, so Gabrielle wasn't sure she could ever recall Puss being *concerned* on Steffen's behalf. "I hadn't thought of that," she admitted, walking the length of the room to approach King Henrik, who was seated on his throne and looking much better than he had in months.

"It is inescapable now. The only thing you can do is speak with care," Puss said.

"What are you two whispering about?" Steffen asked, drawing closer so he could slide a hand around Gabrielle's waist.

"Nothing," Gabrielle said, keeping her voice cheerful.

"Gabrielle's biggest mistake—you," Puss said over her head.

"*Puss!*"

Steffen released Gabrielle long enough to reach up and pet Puss, purposefully mussing the hair on the top of his head. "It does me good to know that in spite of everything that's happened, you haven't changed at all, cat."

Puss batted at him. "Miscreant."

"Princess Gabrielle and Master Roland, thank you for so swiftly answering my summons," King Henrik smiled.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Puss chirped, his voice oozing with charm. "It is our delight to serve you."

Gabrielle curtsied. "It is good to see you so well recovered, Your Majesty," she said as she tucked her hand in the crook of Steffen's arm.

"Thank you. It seems I have much to thank you for, my dearest daughter-in-law." King Henrik stood—still sporting some residual effects of Clotilde's clutches judging by the stoop of

his shoulders—and descended the stairs. “As I am sure you and the clever Master Roland has already guessed, I have called you here today to learn of what happened during Clotilde’s reign.”

“Your Majesty, you must stop torturing yourself,” Gabrielle said. “Since the return of your children, we have done nothing but discuss what Clotilde did.”

“Indeed,” Puss added. “She was boring to listen to when she was alive; her death has done nothing to improve the situation. It is time we forget that treacherous snake and discuss more important things.”

King Henrik stopped just short of Gabrielle and gestured to a servant. “I agree,” he said as several servants brought chairs forward. “Which is why today I specifically wish to hear of all the good you two did during my inactivity and the absence of the other royal children.”

“Good, Your Majesty?” Puss asked as the three royals seated themselves.

“Your Majesty is too kind,” Gabrielle said. “I fear we did very little.”

“Drop the act, ogre-slayer; I know you too well. Neither you nor Master Roland would sit idly by whilst the country suffered. Now, tell me of all your deeds. I am certain you received no recognition for your work at the time. I seek to rectify that,” King Henrik said, clasping his hands together.

Puss and Gabrielle exchanged looks.

Steffen reached out and threaded his fingers through Gabrielle’s and then squeezed her palm. “He’s right, Gabi. You deserve to be acknowledged. Please.”

Puss dropped from her shoulder to his lap. His tail twitched back and forth with unspoken tension, which Gabrielle mirrored as her husband—whom she had missed almost to the point of illness—stared at her with his beautiful blue eyes that she hadn’t known if she would ever see again.

“You wish to know what we did?” Gabrielle said, her tone careful and pitched lightly.

“Yes,” King Henrik said.

“I see.” She pet Puss, hoping to buy herself some time as she thought up a diplomatic response. What had they done? What *hadn’t* they done?



Sweat dripped into Gabrielle’s eyes, making them sting as she twirled her sword overhead and chopped it down, cutting off the head of a monstrous snake. The body jerked a few times, smashing into Gabrielle and sending her flying.

“There are two more. One to your right, wrapped around a tree trunk, and another at the riverbed,” Puss said.

Gabrielle threw her sword, impaling the snake to the tree, and drew a spare from her lathered horse. “Any signal light from the army?”

“The west encampment signaled they successfully stamped out the goblin pack.”

Gabrielle stalked towards the hissing, angry snake and stabbed her sword through its head. “But?”

“Nothing from the eastern squad.”

Once she was sure the snake was dead, she drew both of her swords from it and hacked off its head for good measure. “We’ll go there next?”

“After you see to the riverbed snake,” Puss said, leaping onto her shoulder.

“You’re hurt,” Gabrielle said, with alarm, seeing the ugly cut that sliced across the bridge of his nose.

“It’s a big snake,” Puss said, his voice unusually grim.

Gabrielle grabbed the reins of her horse and started leading it through the forest. “Will you turn us invisible?”

“Won’t do any good. The snake will feel you coming from the vibrations on the ground.”

“What?”

“Just prepare yourself,” Puss said.

She grunted. “Never again will I allow anyone to judge Rune for abstaining from bookwork and politics like the rest of his siblings and working as a hero. I cannot *fathom* how he can spend his days monster-hunting and not complain.”

“The increase of monsters has worsened since his untimely absence and Clod-pole’s unchecked rule,” Puss said.

“It’s as bad as Carabas was when the ogre was around—only worse—because this time it’s the *whole* country,” Gabrielle said, ducking under a tree branch. She could hear the frothy gush of the river; the snake had to be near.

She left the forest, leaving the dirt for rocks and silt. The river was down, leaving a larger bed than usual. Gabrielle peered up and down stream before she spotted the monster. It was coiled, but its beady eyes were trained on her, and it flicked its tongue out. It was the largest of the giant snakes Gabrielle had faced, with a girth that was the same circumference as a small tree.

“It’s a shame I haven’t trained with a spear or lance,” Gabrielle said, checking her swords.

“Something for you to remedy with the royal weapons master. Be careful with this one. I believe it is venomous.”

“Better and better. Do you have any magical tricks to give me an edge?”

“I cannot make it sleep, if that is what you’re hoping for.”

She sighed. “Of course not, that would make this too easy. You better take yourself off, then. This one is going to take more footwork than the others.”

“I will search out the venom antidotes you packed,” Puss said, jumping from Gabrielle’s shoulder to her horse’s saddle. He had to pause for a moment rub a forepaw across his bleeding wound.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” Gabrielle said, rolling her shoulders.

“Gladly.”

When the snake uncoiled, Gabrielle stopped stalling and ran at it. She tossed one of her swords aside but within reach should she need it, scaled a large boulder, and then, having secured a height advantage, leaped down on the snake. She sliced it, but it instantly enveloped her feet with its massive coils and pulled itself taut, uncomfortably squeezing her and anchoring her so she couldn’t easily move.

Gabrielle slipped a knife from her belt and plunged it into the coils. The snake loosened long enough for her to slip one of her feet out.

The snake wrapped around behind her back—trying to entangle her body—but she stabbed her dagger in its eye, blinding it. The snake writhed, and Gabrielle slipped from its grasp, losing her dagger when she staggered. It lunged for her, but Gabrielle was faster and stabbed her sword through the roof of the snake’s gaping mouth.

She abandoned the sword and retreated to her second sword, watching and waiting as the snake died.

“Well done,” Puss praised when the snake finally expired.

“Not really. I nearly let it coil around me,” Gabrielle frowned. She cut off the monster’s head and picked up her sword. She looked around for her dagger and spotted it half hidden under a bush. “But at least now we can—” she cut herself off when she bent to reclaim the weapon, and something that felt like an animal trap clamped down on her arm.

“Gabrielle!”

Gabrielle held in a scream of agony and thrust her sword down into the head of the smaller snake—probably the offspring of the monster she had just killed—that had hidden itself under the bush. She pried it off her and grit her teeth as her arm throbbed with pain.

“Yes. I’m going to gut anyone who makes snotty comments about Rune’s occupation,” she decided. Shock loomed over her shoulder, but Gabrielle ignored it—she couldn’t afford to slip into hysterics—and returned to her horse. Since Rune’s, exit she had fought more evil creatures than she cared to remember and had been badly bruised and injured several dozen times. By this point, shock and pumping adrenaline were practically her close companions.

“Take one of the antidotes,” Puss said, nosing a saddle pack.

She stumbled and would have fallen if she hadn’t caught herself on her weary horse. “Yes,” she agreed. She dropped her weapons and took a swig from a blue bottle—one of several gifts from the Lady Enchantress Angelique before she left after failing to off Clotilde. The potion was a soothing cool stream to the hot, angry cloud of pain that was spreading up her arm. It tasted oddly frigid, but its affect was as quickly acting as the snake bite. “I will have to send my thanks to the Lady Enchantress.”

“Pour some of the tonic on the bite,” Puss said, his voice tight.

Gabrielle did as she was instructed and then leaned against her horse, sagging with fatigue. “Don’t worry, Puss,” she said when she felt his furry head brush hers. “I’m just tired.”

“Rightfully so.” He made a noise of disapproval when Gabrielle put her foot in the stirrup and swung up on her horse, almost collapsing on its neck. “You need to rest.”

“Yes, but the east squad needs rescuing first.”

“Do not push yourself to exhaustion, Mistress. It will help no one.”

Gabrielle shook her head and turned her horse in a circle as she tried to get her bearings. She finally found east and nudged her horse down the riverbed. “I promised Steffen I would care for the country if he was gone. I have to make good on my word.”

Even if I want to collapse and cry. Even if I want to run to Verglas just to see him as a bird. I cannot give up!



Gabrielle pushed with all of her strength. Her arms shook, and her legs buckled. “Do you have it?”

“Almost. Pull, men!”

The weight of the cart eased from her arms as men pulled it onto solid ground and set rocks behind its wheels, keeping it from rolling back down the inclined path and into the muck hole from which she and the men had fished it out.

Gabrielle climbed out of the mud pit and tried to wipe muck off her clothes.

“It’s no good. You’ll have to leap into the ocean to clean off,” Puss said, wrinkling his nose at her.

“I’m half tempted to,” she said, smearing dirt on her face when she dabbed sweat from her forehead. She looked out over Carabas Harbor, or what remained of it. Unfortunately, much of the rebuilding effort that had been poured into the harbor had been ruined by a massive

monsoon that had swept across the coast. While the castle had fared well, being that it was placed on the top of a hill and drained easily, the surrounding city had been torn asunder, and the harbor was in shambles. Only fragments of the docks remained; some of the rebuilt buildings had been toppled, and the few ships that had been in the harbor were half sunk.

“At least the lighthouse made it,” Gabrielle murmured, looking at the tall structure that was a lonely figure on a jutting peninsula. She sighed, rolled her neck, and moved to help set planks across the muddy path, making travel a little easier.

“Have you decided what to do about the failed summer crops?” Puss asked, picking his way around a puddle.

“We’ll have to buy food.”

“That’s a short-term solution.”

“I know, but it’s not my intension to look far out. When Elise gets back, she can open the treasury and purchase seed and lower taxes, and that will be that,” Gabrielle said, setting the last plank in place. She inhaled deeply and scowled at the smell of dead fish. She swiped a pair of leather gloves and rushed to help steady a fence post that was getting replaced.

“Thank you, Marquise,” the woman who had been struggling to hold the post said.

Gabrielle smiled and nodded. “My pleasure.”

“The entire country needs food, Mistress. How do you intend to weasel out those kinds of funds from the Clot-pole?”

Gabrielle shifted to hold the corner post. “We won’t be able to get any funds from Clotilde. The jewels and luxuries I scalp from her barely cover the army.”

“Then where are you going to get these funds?” Puss asked.

“We’ll have to dip into the Carabas treasury,” Gabrielle grimly said.

“They aren’t your people. Carabas has mercifully had a harvest—a lean one, but at least they have food.”

“They are too my people. I’m not just a marquise, but a princess as well, Puss. They’re all my concern,” Gabrielle grunted, wincing when the wooden post vibrated as a man hammered a nail into it.

“Thank you, Marquise,” the man said. “Please, return to your castle and rest for a bit.”

Gabrielle waved him off and instead started picking up debris—splintered wood, garbage, and the like—from the streets and dragged it to a refuse pile. “If it makes you feel better, Puss, we can keep a record. Elise will pay us back when it’s all over, provided we barter hard for the food.”

“Maybe, but I don’t believe anyone could put a price on what you’re going through to keep Arcainia together,” Puss said.

Gabrielle pulled a tree branch that was as long as a horse down the road. Her mud-covered boots squelched; her back ached, and she could taste grit in her teeth, but she continued tirelessly. “It’s not just me, it’s all the citizens. We’re all waiting for Elise and the princes, and we’re all suffering under Clotilde’s reign together,” Gabrielle said, gasping in relief when she finally reached the refuse pile. “And you’re not fooling me. You’ve worked yourself unconscious several times with all the spells and charms you perform for commoners.”

Puss sniffed. “Mere happenstance. Besides, it is not my health that needs to be addressed, but yours.”

She grinned. “Your concern is sweet.”

“I did not say I was *concerned!*”

“Chin up, Puss. I’d be doing the same things whether I was a princess, a marquise, or just a no-name hero.”

“You would never be no-name,” Puss scoffed. “My skills and talents at publicizing are far too extensive for *that*.”

Gabrielle laughed and strolled towards a fallen fence that was in a tangle. “I’ll agree to that!”



Gabrielle was silent and stealthy as she crept through the dungeons. Puss was perched on her shoulders. His massive weight made her muscles ache, but she kept quiet, moving under the gelatinous feeling of his invisibility spell.

She hesitated when she came upon the ring of torchlight that lit up the damp, cracked innards of the castle. Three men were huddled in the sputtering light. One was seated on a rickety chair; the other two were crouched and tossed dice between them.

“This is the only time there are just three dungeon-keepers on duty. This is the optimal hour to make an attempt,” Puss hissed in her ear.

Gabrielle didn’t dare respond. Instead, she skulked forward, daringly entering the light. Puss’s spell kept them so well cloaked, she didn’t even cast a shadow on the ground. She held her breath as she sidled up next to one of the dice players. She tapped Puss’s paw, and on the third touch, he leaped from her shoulder.

“Sleep,” he said to the first dungeon-keeper—who went down like a sack of potatoes.

Gabrielle beamed the second dungeon-keeper in the chin with the hilt of her sword, knocking him onto his butt, then kicked him in the chest—forcing the air out of his lungs—and finished she by whacking his throat with her scabbard, taking all the fight out of him.

She whirled, intending to slam into the next dungeon-keeper with her sword. To her surprise, he had his arms raised, and a ring of keys dangled from his fingers.

“I know why you’re here, Princess,” he said. “And I thank you for it. It makes me sick at heart to keep the innocent penned in here like animals.”

Gabrielle took the keys. “Are you certain you would not like me to give you a bruise or two? Clotilde will be furious when she finds out her prisoners have escaped.”

“It will be some time before she remembers she had prisoners, Princess,” the prison-keeper said as he stepped aside with a wry smile.

“Don’t question the man, Gabrielle. Set the civilians free!” Puss said after applying the sleeping charm to the second prison-keeper.

Gabrielle strode down the grimy dungeon aisle and paused at a prison cell filled with women and children of varying ages. “Is everyone alright?” she asked as she fumbled with the keys.

“My husband,” a young woman gasped, throwing herself against the bars of the prison.

“Is still in Castle Brandis. He’ll learn of your freedom before leaving for Verglas with the rest of the soldiers.” The lock clanked, and Gabrielle pulled the door open.

“Bless you, Princess,” a woman carrying a toddler cried.

Gabrielle offered her a quick smile and moved to the next civilian-filled dungeon. “Puss, lead them out.”

“This way, civilians-who-will-be-as-quiet-as-lambs-or-else,” Puss said, his white paws glowing in the dim light as he led the way from the dungeon.

“It’s despicable,” the still-conscious prison-keeper said, shaking his head. “Keeping soldiers’ families captive to spurn them into lookin’ for the princes and the Fürstin.”

“All that matters is that she’s been thwarted,” Gabrielle said, opening the door and stepping aside for the stream of women and children. “Thank you for your help.”

“Of course, Princess.”

Gabrielle opened two more cells of prisoners. The last cell held a sickly girl of seven or eight who couldn’t stand. Her mother tried to carry her, but she had two younger children—one of whom was a toddler who could barely walk. “Here, allow me,” Gabrielle said, hunkering down so the sick girl could ride on her back.

“Where will we go, Princess? If Clotilde finds us, she will kill us,” the mother said, her eyes clouded with tears and defeat.

“Then I will take you outside of her reach.” Gabrielle stepped out of the cell, careful for the child riding her back.

“You mean…Carabas?” the sick girl asked, her arms draped around Gabrielle’s neck.

“I do. There’s a group of soldiers and wagons waiting for you outside of Brandis. They will see you safely there.”

The little girl coughed. “Carabas…it must be beautiful.”

“Why do you say that?” Gabrielle asked as she carried her from the dungeon, snaking through the castle.

“Because Carabas is *yours*,” the little girl said.

Gabrielle hesitated for the briefest moment, feeling small and humbled by the girl’s open trust.

I have to hold this country together, she thought as she stifled her tears. I promised. I Promised!



Gabrielle shook her head, clearing her mind of the painful past. She smiled at King Henrik and Steffen as she scratched Puss behind his ear. “We didn’t do much. A few stealth missions and the like. Puss rolled on Clotilde’s pillows—she was allergic to cats—and I dabbled with remodeling her portraits. That was about all.”

“I fear, daughter-in-law, that you are severely editing your adventures,” King Henrik said as he leaned back in his chair.

Steffen said nothing but wore a thoughtful frown.

“If you do not believe me, you can ask Puss,” Gabrielle said.

“We were rather occupied trying to stay out of Clotilde’s clutches,” Puss said, carefully toeing the line between leaving out parts of the story and lying.

King Henrik shook his head, but a gleam of amusement lurked in his eyes. “I don’t know what to do with the pair of you. Very well, if you insist upon secrecy, I shall have to interview servants and governmental employees. Your adventures will be sorted out, Gabrielle, Master Roland!”

“I hope our performance will not disappoint you, Your Majesty,” Puss said.

King Henrik swatted the title aside. “Enough—both of you. I have no right to be called Your Majesty. I have been a poor King and an even worse father.”

“I disagree,” Gabrielle said. “I have greatly enjoyed entering your family, and I count myself lucky to be your daughter-in-law.”

“Indeed,” Puss echoed. “If the greatest disadvantage in her marriage is *whom* she got herself saddled with, her greatest advantage is that she gained a wonderful paternal figure who embraces her less-than-common pursuits.”

Puss and King Henrik looked to Steffen, waiting for a rebuttal. Steffen appeared to be deep in thought, but when he noticed their attention, he put on a smile. “I’m going to miss the years you were silent while in Brandis, cat.”

“That is right. All now know of your abilities, Master Roland,” King Henrik said.

“I do enjoy being able to freely speak my thoughts,” Puss said, ignoring Steffen’s snort. “And it is quite timely, as it will allow me to explain some of the finer points of magic to Fürstin Elise.”

“You are hoping to get into her good graces by teaching her?” King Henrik guessed. “Why? Neither you nor Gabrielle are the head of a department. You do not have to worry about her infamous budget demands.”

“Perhaps not, but there is a debt I would like her to settle, and Carabas will sadly, again, require funds to rebuild... The civilians patched it up after the monsoon as best as they could, so I was told, but the docks will need to be constructed all over again,” Puss said, masterfully spinning his story.

Steffen abruptly stood. “Is that all you wanted, Father?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. Timo wished to speak with you later today, Steffen.”

“About?”

“The new guard rotation.”

As the father and son spoke, Gabrielle—carrying Puss—discreetly drifted away.

“Fleeing?” Puss asked.

“Think of it as retreating before we are further questioned. You approve of my response?”

“It was very kindly worded, though I fear the flapping mouths of the commoners and the guards.”

“Hearing of it second-hand from others is an improvement over learning of it first-hand from you and me.”

“Precisely,” Puss said as Gabrielle slipped out of the throne room. He awkwardly cleared his throat and twitched his tail. “I have not yet told you, Gabrielle, but you did well. You acted with honor and a graciousness few royals have.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” Gabrielle said.

“Your character is what supports you, Mistress, not I.”

“No—I mean it, Puss. It’s frustrating because common words can’t convey it, but I mean it from every corner of my soul. I couldn’t have held on alone. I am so lucky to have you, Roland.”

“It’s Puss,” he said gruffly. “And I am blessed to have you.”

Gabrielle lifted Puss up and cuddled him to her chest. He rested his chin on her shoulder and purred, the warm vibrations filling the silence neither could bridge.

“I believe,” Puss said after several quite minutes. “I will begin my campaign to speak to Elise. Angelique is with her now. It would be wisest for me to approach her with Angelique present to vouch for me.”

“You want back the Carabas funds we spent to purchase food, don’t you?” Gabrielle asked as she crouched and set the magic cat on the ground.

“Of course I do. Enjoy your afternoon with your bumpkin-head.”

“Thank you. Take care.”

Puss trotted away, his tail held high. Gabrielle watched him go with a fond smile.

“When I first married you, I thought I would hate him,” Steffen said, surprising her with his sudden arrival. “I knew there would always be a special friendship between you two that I can’t be a part of.”

“What? That’s not true—well, not fully. After myself, you are the person he speaks with the most,” Gabrielle protested. “I know he acts like he holds you in disdain, but that’s just Puss. If he was sweet to you, then I would say you had best be wary of him.”

Steffen smiled and leaned in, kissing her cheek. “You mistake me. It was a reflection more on my poor character that I would stoop so low as to be jealous of a *cat* than it was a judgment against your dear companion. No, I have quite changed my mind about him. I am very, very thankful you have him.” Steffen looked at her with an unfathomable expression, one that made him seem as timeless and weary as Angelique. “I—nor my family—can comprehend the hell you lived through, Gabrielle. All I can say is that I am so sorry—which is just pathetic.”

Gabrielle placed her hands on his warm, firm chest. “You are too hard on yourself.”

He shook his head and looked down.

“Steffen.” She shifted so her voice was firm. “You—and Arcainia—are worth all I experienced. I regret nothing. *I love you—constantly, not just when the kingdom is doing well. Just as Puss comes with me, I recognize—and embrace—that the kingdom comes with you. If you continue to mourn what happened, you will eventually regret loving me.*”

Steffen shook his head. “Never. But sometimes I think it would be better for *you* if you didn’t love me.”

Gabrielle wanted to choke him for uttering such stupid words, but the look in his eyes bespoke of his fear. “I am the ogre-slayer, Steffen. Pain and suffering would find me no matter whom I married. But, it is *you* I love. I love your resilience, your clever wit, your desire to protect, and so much more. Have confidence in us. For just as you chose me, I chose you.”

Her words had some effect on him. He stood a little straighter, and his smile was not sad, but warm. “Thank you,” he said, resting his forehead against hers. “I love you, Gabrielle, and I will tell you so every day for the rest of our lives.”

He kissed her—a long kiss full of love and promise that he wouldn’t take her lightly, that he wouldn’t stop loving her, and that his passion for her was as deep as his soul.

“I’m so glad you’re home,” Gabrielle whispered when they parted.

“You did well,” Steffen said, resting his cheek on the crown of her head.

Gabrielle closed her eyes, leaned into his chest, and listened to the steady thunder of his heart. *This is what Puss and I fought for, and it’s what we’ll fight for again. As long as I breathe, I will wage war on Steffen’s behalf. For love, I will resist the darkness. For love, I will give my everything.*

Steffen, as if sensing her thoughts, said, “Together, Gabrielle. We can fight together, and no matter how I am cursed or tortured, I will remember you, and I will love you.”

Together.

The End