

Unlikely Heroes

A Puss in Boots Short Story

By K. M. Shea

For years the residents of Carabas had prayed and hoped for a hero, someone who would rescue them from the tyranny of the ogre. They imagined a knight in golden armor, or a clever mage, or a massive army. Instead, they got...

"No, I'm not wearing dresses except for fancy occasions. I took out five goblins yesterday; I don't want to imagine what fighting them in skirts would be like," Lady Gabrielle, the new Marquise of Carabas, announced as she frowned at the wardrobe list her lady's maid had proposed.

"You do realize you'll have to don skirts in Castle Brandis," the lady's black and white *cat* said. (It took the citizens of Carabas nearly a full week to accept that the cat did indeed talk.)

"That's why it's important that I don't wear them here," Lady Gabrielle said tilting her head to a fetching angle. She was a beauty to behold and reminded her subjects more of a princess than a hero. The cat, apparently, did not share their opinion.

"Barbarian," he said.

"Fuss-pot," the Marquise said.

It wasn't merely that it was surprising that a lady—an *unmarried girl*—was the one to kill the ogre, or that her cat talked. It was also the way she did things.

"So, Prince Falk explained that if we plant the crops this fall—particularly the winter wheat—they will survive the snowfall and can be harvested in the spring. He'll be arriving in a few days to demonstrate cultivation methods," Lady Gabrielle said, standing in the middle of a newly plowed field.

"Very good, My Lady," a farmer said.

"Great. So what do you need help with?" Lady Gabrielle asked as she dusted off her palms.

"...My Lady?"

"I thought I would help you today. While I haven't completely stamped out the goblin infestation, their numbers have been reduced enough that I can spare a day to help you prepare for Prince Falk's arrival."

The cat yawned. "Are you sure you won't merely be a hindrance to your stout tenants?" he asked, drawing a shiver from several men.

The Marquise flipped the braid of her creamy blonde hair over her shoulder. "Of course not. I've helped Marta with her garden ever since she married my brother."

"It would be unseemly for you to dirty your hands, Marquise Gabrielle," said Vin—a big, gruff man who had become the pillar of the farming community over the past few years as he could coax plants from the defiled ground.

"What a silly thing to say," the Marquise said, rolling over hulking Vin like a runaway coach. "All Arcainian royalty *does* these days is dirty their hands. How else did you think Prince Falk would demonstrate cultivation methods?"

The cat stretched and arched his back. "Might I remind you, Mistress, that these poor peasants have been cut off from Arcainia for years, and have not accustomed themselves to the ways of King Henrik and his children—in particular their unusual work ethic."

“I suppose that’s true. I haven’t been the best at relating country news. Working with you will give me plenty of time to right that wrong. So, what do we begin with?” the Marquise asked, pinning Vin with her stunning amber eyes.

“Er,” Vin said, unable to refuse such determination and beauty.

The cat laughed.

Some had wondered if the new Marquise was even the one who had successfully killed the ogre. Their doubts were put to rest the day bandits thought to test Carabas lands for raiding.

“Get inside and bar your door,” Lady Gabrielle said, helping a teenage girl into her home.

“But, lady, the soldiers! They haven’t arrived yet!” the girl cried.

“They’ll be along shortly,” the Marquise said in a soothing voice.

“We’ll be skewered without them!” the teenager hiccupped.

“Gabrielle,” the talking cat said.

“Coming,” the Marquise said before she returned her attention to the girl. “Don’t you fret. Bandits are a much easier foe to face than ogres, but if you’re that worried, keep a shovel handy, and swing if one breaks in.”

Lady Gabrielle spun around and stalked towards the incoming invaders, slipping her sword out of its scabbard. “Puss.”

“Of course.” The black and white cat jumped onto her shoulder, and the two disappeared.

The village girl threw the door shut with a squeak and lowered the bar over the door. She darted to the window—intending to pull the shutters shut—but froze when she looked outside.

Soldiers were falling like decaying flour petals, and it wasn’t until three of them were knocked over that Lady Gabrielle and the cat winked into view.

“Sleep,” the cat said.

A bandit flopped to the ground.

“Why can’t you put the whole group to sleep at once?” Lady Gabrielle asked, parrying a blow from a bandit before kicking him in the kneecap. When the bandit hunched over, she slammed the hilt of her sword into his spin, toppling him.

“Perhaps I can, but I choose not to so as to assure that you keep your defense skills sharp,” the cat said.

Lady Gabrielle snorted. “As if. Your magic probably isn’t potent enough.”

“I shall remember your words, you impudent harpy.”

“I love you too, Puss!”

The village girl stared, transfixed, and watched the lady and her cat attack the bandits like wolves set loose among sheep. It was assured that Lady Gabrielle had indeed taken out the ogre.

Out of all her eccentricities—from her *magical* cat, to her willingness to work—perhaps what was most surprising of all, was that such an unusual girl had caught the affections of a prince. And it wasn’t just any prince, but *Crown Prince Steffen*.

“What’s wrong?” Bern—a footman—asked Gerlinde—Lady Gabrielle’s lady’s maid. They were *supposed* to be preparing a table for the Marquise and Prince Steffen to take tea, but Gerlinde was too busy gawking at the pair as they strolled through the crusty, ill-kept gardens.

“Do you really think he loves her?” Gerlinde asked.

Bern frowned. “Do you mean to question if our Marquise is not worthy of the prince?” he rumbled, remembering the time Lady Gabrielle had spent an afternoon fixing doors in the city surrounding her castle.

“No, not at all. Our lady is *wonderful*,” Gerlinde said firmly. “She is a real hero. It’s only...do you think he knows that? She’s so beautiful, he might not have noticed.”

“I reckon Master Puss would run him off if he didn’t really love her,” Bern said.

The relief in Gerlinde’s face softened the sharpness of her features and made her drop her shoulders. “You’re right. Master Puss wouldn’t allow such a match, and the prince *does* look at her with adoration.”

Bern laughed.

“What is it?”

He shook his head. “Tis strange. I never thought we would take the word of a cat and question the motives of a prince.”

Gerlinde earnestly nodded. “Our new Marquise has changed us.”

“Indeed,” Bern agreed.

Lady Gabrielle, Marquise of Carabas, was not what her tenants had pictured as their deliverance because in many ways she—and Master Puss—were far better than anything they could have imagined.

The End