

Pipit
by Emily Michel

THE SILVER DAGGER hit the dartboard with a satisfying thwang. The denizens of the dingy pub oohed and ahed. Pipit turned around with a wide grin. Her dagger, a gift from Rane, gleamed in its glory from the center of the board.

“Pay up.” She stretched out her hand to her opponent.

“You cheated,” the burly fairy grumbled, sticking his hands in his pockets.

A low hiss came from Zol, wrapped around her neck like some fancy scarf. His gray ears twitched back as he stared at the skinflint fairy.

“I did not, and you know it. If you don’t pay up, I will loose the grimalkin.”

Zol hissed again, his tail tickling her chin. Pipit fought hard to keep a giggle down. She would lose credibility if she started giggling when accused of cheating.

The big fairy leaned down, but wisely stayed out of reach of the grimalkin’s paws. He snarled at her, baring sharpened teeth and bad breath.

“I don’t know who you think you are, little pixie, but this is my place, my town, and what I say goes.”

In a blink, she pulled another dagger from one of her secret pockets while muttering a spell that pulled the royal blade from the dartboard. It flew through the crowded pub, sending several spectators ducking and shouting, before it slapped into her hand. Her opponent blinked and wariness settled on his face.

Pipit twirled the gifted blade in her hand while holding the other ready to stab the man in the kidney. His gaze darted to the moving dagger. Not the smartest move. As long as the silver blade was in motion, it wasn’t stabbing him. The other was far more dangerous.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” She never took her eyes off him, looking for tells and a chance to let him leave here alive.

He grunted. “Pretty blades are only good for flash. A real fairy doesn’t need to show off.”

“True,” she replied. “But it’s fun. I just came in for a drink and a game, friend. You were the one who wanted to place a bet. I won, so pay up. I won’t ask again.”

She saw it, the evil thought that crossed his mind, reflecting in his beady eyes and the flush of anger on his cheeks. He lunged at her, but she was already moving. Pipit ducked and spun, and Zol leaped off her shoulders and onto his head. The cat dug his claws into the big fairy’s scalp and a very interesting noise dribbled from the asshole’s mouth—part scream, part whimper.

Pipit leaped on his back, her brown dragonfly wings fluttering wildly. The crowd backed up with a few cries of surprise, then hushed. Zol’s yowls mingled with the fairy’s burbling screams as he tried to pull the grimalkin off his head.

He froze as her silver blade nicked his throat.

“You have a choice,” she hissed into his ear. “You can pay up now, and we’ll let you go with no further blood spilled. If you cannot pay in coins, I’m willing to consider barter or services. Or you can continue this nonsense and your friends can bury your body before night falls.”

His muscles relaxed and his head tipped forward in surrender. Pipit slid off his back.

“Here, Zol.” She whistled, and with one last hiss, the cat leaped from the fairy’s head and landed once more on her shoulders. He curled around her neck and closed his eyes as if nothing had happened.

The fairy dug into his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins. She took them with a smile and turned to go.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asked.

Pipit paused but didn’t turn back. “Apparently, your worst nightmare. Be careful the next time you pass through the Argent Forest, friend. The guardians may not be kind to a man who has behaved dishonorably toward one of their own.”

The crowd murmured their surprise and confusion.

“One of the Seven.”

“A Sister? Here?”

“Oh, shit.”

Humming to herself, Pipit left them to their afternoon, her pockets full of coins for spending at the market. She should hurry. It closed at sunset, and she'd promised Lark to pick up a few necessities.

Though pixies were uncommon in the harbor city of Nimel, they weren't unheard of. Only a few city folk stared openly, though that could be as much for Zol as it was for her. The cat had grown to twice his size since Wren had found him in the woods over a year ago, though he was surprisingly light. He barely felt heavier than the first time he'd curled around her shoulders. Perhaps the magic of a grimalkin. She should ask Ebon sometime. He liked books and would know.

Pipit strolled through the market, stopping at a stall selling sweet soaps and another selling dried herbs from far away. She finally found her favorite tea merchant and picked up her and her sisters' favorite blends. The forest provided most of what they needed, but soap making was messy and time consuming, the herbs were important for the salves Oriole made, and who could live a life without tea?

She was carefully packing her purchases in her bag when a flash of sky-blue hair and a pink dress ducked down an alley two dozen paces away. Close behind, a group of three men followed. The town wasn't hers to protect, but that instinct had been honed as sharp as her blades over the past ten years. And everything in her screamed that the blue-haired person needed her protection.

Dashing through the crowd, Pipit used her wings to clear space, and she was only a few seconds behind the men. The three humans had cornered a delicate fae woman, her disheveled hair brilliant in the dim light of the alley. Mud streaked her magenta dress, and she waved a large kitchen knife in front of her. Her other hand trembled as she held it up in a defensive position.

“Come on, now, sweet thing. There's no need for this. We just want to have a little fun.” The apparent ringleader was a handsome man with a scar down one side of his face. His companions were less handsome, but she could see the appeal if they weren't behaving like monsters.

“Fuck off, Aritz. I said no, I meant no. Just because I work for your family doesn’t mean you own me.” Her voice was strong and steady, belying her trembling hands.

“You don’t want to do that, Dove. A word from me and you’ll be out of a job.”

May Veitha use this man’s balls as treats for his hounds. Fucker was trying to coerce a woman by threatening her livelihood. It was time for Pipit to step in.

“I don’t think that’s a smart move.” She pulled out her favorite dagger again. Zol laid his ears back and bared his teeth in a silent hiss.

The woman didn’t take her eyes off her pursuers, but as a man, they turned to examine Pipit. Matching sneers formed on their faces as they took in her diminutive stature. She was smaller than this Dove, perhaps even seemed more delicate. But the only sister more deadly than she was Lark, the eldest.

“What are you going to do about it, pipsqueak?” said the biggest of the losers. Why was it always the biggest? For once, she’d love to put someone her size in their place. But perhaps that was because people her size were already put in their place by society.

She shook away the philosophical thoughts. Not the time, not the place. She had some ass to kick.

Pipit muttered into Zol’s ear and the grimalkin vanished. The men blinked at that, and while they did, a good half-dozen more blades appeared in her hands. She allowed her gaze to flick to the woman. Pipit’s lips twitched up before settling back to where they were. At the very least, Dove knew she was no longer alone.

“Step aside and allow her to leave, and I’ll do the same with you,” she said, gesturing with her blades.

The third man, who had so far remained silent, gulped visibly. Good, there was one smart man in the bunch. Maybe with his help, she wouldn’t be cleaning blood off her knives tonight.

“We should just go, Aritz. This wasn’t supposed to be hard.”

“Shut the fuck up. I won’t let some pixie tell me what to do.”

Pipit hated this Aritz more and more every time he opened his mouth.

“You should. If you leave now, I’ll forget your name as long as you promise the woman she will still have a job, if she even wants it now.”

“And if I don’t?” He sneered, pulling the scar tight across his cheek.

For a moment, Pipit was tempted to break it open, but instead she flung a blade at his feet. It lodged in his shoe, between his two biggest toes.

“That was a warning shot,” she said calmly as the two other men backed away from the ringleader. “The next one will go in your shoulder, and the one after that will cut off your cock.”

“You can’t threaten me. Do you know who I am?”

“I don’t care who you are. You don’t chase women who have told you no, turd for brains. And this isn’t a threat. It’s a promise—a fairy oath.”

The air was sucked out of the alley. The other two men locked eyes and scrambled away. They gave Pipit as wide a berth as the narrow passage would allow before stumbling into the street and running. Aritz looked like he wished he’d joined them.

His gaze darted between her, her blades, and the exit. Pipit stepped aside, pressing against the wall. She gestured toward the end of the alley.

“Your exit is there. All you have to do is give me your word she still has a job and you can go.”

He gulped but said nothing as he inched his way toward the exit.

Pipit shook her head. “Zol, now please.”

The grimalkin appeared an arm’s length from Aritz, now the size of a large lynx and spitting mad. He arched his back and growled, low and deep. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end, and the man leaped back. A giggle escaped the lips of the woman. Pipit spared her a glance. Her knife was held down at her side, and she had stopped trembling. Instead of fear, amusement lit her face and brightened her brown eyes.

“Fine,” Aritz spat. “You have my word. Dove can keep her fucking job.”

Pipit whistled, and Zol transformed back into his typical size and trotted back to her. That was a new trick. She’d merely expected the grimalkin to bite the man’s ankles, maybe leap onto his head. Apparently, the cat had other ideas.

“You can go. If I find you have broken your word, I will pay you another visit with my sisters. They have even less patience for turd-heads than I do.”

He scuttled away, like the vermin he was, disappearing into the crowd. Zol followed her as she approached the young woman.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Dove dropped the kitchen knife and leaned against the wall behind her. “I am now. Thank you.”

Pipit held her hand on her chest, just below her collarbones, and nodded. “I’m Pipit.”

The woman blinked. “One of the Seven? Those are your sisters?”

And then she laughed, a wonderful sound filled with music and joy. Shivers of something she hadn’t felt in a long time invaded Pipit’s body. Dove slid down until she sat on the ground and put her head between her raised knees. Zol sashayed over and rubbed his face against her hand. She idly scratched his ears, and a rumbling purr soon filled the air.

“Aritz doesn’t know just how lucky he was. Idoya’s tits.”

Dove’s looked up, her liquid brown eyes gleaming with amusement and something else. Something that amplified those shivers and sent warmth curling through her belly and settling lower.

“I’m Dove,” she said, holding out her hand.

Pipit took it and pulled her to her feet. “I know. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, the pleasure is all mine. Can I buy you a drink? It’s not every day a girl gets rescued by one of the Seven.”

Pipit laughed. “Sure, but don’t you have to get back to work?”

Dove sniffed. “Fuck them and their job. There’s plenty of work for me here, and if I have to, I’ll go to Avora.”

“Well, then I’m buying to celebrate this newfound freedom.”

Only then did she realize neither of them had let go. Zol mewed excitedly and followed as they exited the alley. They discussed which pub to visit, their fingers still entwined. An excellent day in the city, indeed.