

A Kitten Named Kippen

An Elsebeneath Interlude

by Juno Threadborne

Kippen woke the way he always did—like someone who had never once worried the world might not adore him. There was no one in the house to tell him otherwise. There hadn't been for quite some time, though the scarf on the doorknob still seemed to remember someone else's name.

He tugged on his favorite sweater vest (buttoned one too high, as usual) and his green plaid cap tilted slightly left, as always. His dirt-dappled fur was a mix that couldn't decide if it was orange or gray.

"Perfect," he thought, scrunching his already-scrunched nose at his reflection in the kettle. "Today is going to be *very* Kippen."

The kettle, long since retired from whistling, fogged slightly in response. It used to belong to someone with strong tea opinions. Now it mostly gave compliments.

Outside, the Village of Voicekeepers hummed awake. Doors mumbled to themselves, ribbons rustled as if remembering things they meant to say yesterday, and chimes caught stray thoughts the way cobwebs catch dust motes. Somewhere, a weathervane spun without wind—just practicing.

The cobbler's shop door creaked softly as Kippen bounded up.

"Morning, Kippen!" the cobbler beamed. "That vest really..." he considered Kippen for a moment, eyes lingering on his face. "...emphasizes your brave little nose!"

Kippen beamed. *Of course it does.*

He had no memory of being brave, exactly. But everyone seemed to agree on the matter, and that felt just as good.

The chime above the door sang a soft greeting as a man entered. He wore a grey coat, barefoot, with index cards spilling from every pocket—like someone who knew *exactly* what shelf all the world's answers lived on, even if most of them were mislabeled.

He noticed Kippen and kneeled next to him.

"Well hello, Kippen," he said with a nod.

“Morning, Gable.”

Gable reached in his pocket and pulled out an especially small card—creased, but proud.

“I think this one is waiting for just the right compliment,” he said, voice low and confident.

He tucked the card in Kippen’s vest pocket and stood. He gave the cobbler a wave as he picked up his shoes and turned to leave. They looked newly polished, but still carried the laces from someone else’s story.

Behind him, a windchime above the door blurted, “Don’t forget your laces!”

Gable spun on his heel, laughing. “Right! Thanks!” and casually unspooled two laces from a display.

A scarf seller was hanging ribbons on a line that sagged like it remembered being tied too tightly.

“Ah, Kippen! Your whiskers look so... *determined* today!”

Determined whiskers, Kippen thought with pride. *Practically general material*.

From behind the cart another cat padded up. She was dark as night and had a small telescope charm tied around her neck with a silver chain—tarnished at the edges, as if it had once tried very hard to belong to someone who forgot to keep it.

She reached out with one paw and tugged at one of Kippen’s crooked whiskers. It sprung right back, more kinked than before.

“Good morning, Vel,” Kippen said with a grin. She nodded and smiled.

Vel flicked her tail thoughtfully as she looked up at the sagging ribbons.

“Those ribbons have seen better days, haven’t they? Like they’re tired of holding on.”

Kippen nodded solemnly, “Maybe they just need a little fresh breeze to remind them what it’s like to fly.”

Vel’s eyes twinkled behind her telescope charm. “You always know just what to say, Kippen.”

Kippen gave a modest bow of his head. “Only when the whiskers are feeling determined.”

A soft gust curled between them, lifting a ribbon that hadn’t moved in weeks.

Vel tilted her head. “That one remembers something,” she said quietly.

Kippen didn’t ask what. He just smiled and moved on.

With a wink, he adjusted his crooked whiskers, tipped his cap to Vel, and continued down the street—his steps light as the chimes above began a soft, wandering tune.

A villager carrying a bundle of letters stepped into his path.

“Morning, Kippen! You’re looking *particularly* dapper today!” she said, beaming.

Kippen flashed a grin that showed every crooked tooth. He beamed the way he always did, like joy was a reflex and praise a daily vitamin.

But something in the villager’s eyes flickered—like a paper lantern catching wind.

Her smile didn’t vanish, but it dimmed.

She looked down at her letters. “Well... yes. I suppose you do.”

Kippen noticed.

Not all of him.

Just a part behind his whiskers, somewhere between his ears and his chest.

It prickled.

Just for a moment.

Like maybe... maybe she hadn’t meant it.

Or maybe she *had*, and that was worse.

He shook it off with a practiced tail-flick.

She’ll get over it. Who could stay mad at me?

He hummed as he walked, until he didn't.

Until a voicekeeper chime caught his eye—
a particularly pretty one, all bent spoons and bottle glass, turning in the breeze like
it was trying to make up its mind.

Kippen tilted his head, smiling at its quiet music.

Behind him, footsteps passed.

Someone glanced his way.

They didn't speak.

The wind stirred.

It threaded through the chime like a question that had waited too long.

The chime rang once—gentle.

And then:

“He doesn't know he's here because he's forgotten.”

Kippen blinked.

The villager walked on, still smiling warmly, never knowing what the chime had
said.

But Kippen stayed.

Paws planted.

Tail still.

The village hummed.

Ribbons rustled.

Doors muttered.

Chimes giggled softly, trying not to make it worse.

And for the first time that morning, Kippen didn't move with it.

He walked slower now.

The village didn't look different—
Every door still half-spoke its half-thoughts.
Every ribbon still fluttered like it wanted to say just one more thing.

But something had shifted.

Something in Kippen's ears.
In the way the air sat on his fur.

The next villager smiled as he passed.
“Morning, Kippen! That hat tilt is perfect today!”

Perfect.
Was it?
Or did she mean “*ridiculous*” and just hadn't learned how to say it gently?

By the time he reached the far end of the square, he'd stopped humming.

His tail—usually a perky little metronome—hung limp, swaying only when the wind insisted.

He paused by the fountain. Watched the ripples.
The reflection that looked back at him was... off.

His snout looked shorter than he remembered.
His whiskers kinked more to the left.
His vest didn't sit quite right on his shoulders.

He'd always thought that meant charm.

But now—

Is this what they see?

And for the first time in his life, the thought didn't just bounce off.
It *stuck*.

“Something's wrong,” a voice said behind him.

Kippen turned.

Brynn stood there, a basket on her hip, her hair tied up like it was thinking about coming loose. She looked at him the way bakers look at dough that's just barely off—like it's still got something rising in it.

"You're walking like someone just told you your vest has been buttoned wrong your whole life."

Kippen blinked. "Has it?"

Brynn tilted her head. Studied him the way only she could—like she was picking a truth from a shelf she hadn't dusted in years.

"You're funny-looking," she said, plain as flour.

Kippen's ears drooped.

"But," she added, stepping closer, "you make people happy. You always have. You bring light just by being you. That's not because you're pretty, Kippen. It's because you're Kippen."

He opened his mouth. Closed it again. His tail twitched like it didn't know what side it was on.

"So that's a... good thing?"

Brynn smiled.

"It's the best kind of thing."

Above them, the wind curled through a ribbon strung between a bakery hook and a bird-shaped chime. It rustled. Shifted. Then settled.

"Tell him he's loved."

Brynn didn't even glance up.

She just reached out and ruffled his scrunched-up little face like she'd done a hundred times before.

Something in his chest—some knot made of compliments and forgettings—eased.

Not completely.

But enough.

And for the first time since the chime...

Kippen smiled and *meant* it.

He walked back through the square with Brynn's words still warm in his chest, like jam on toast.

Like toast that was almost burned, but saved at the last second.

The village hadn't changed.

But it no longer felt like it might slip away the second he stopped performing.

The baker waved from her doorway.

"Morning again, Kippen! You forgot your jam earlier!"

Kippen smiled—*really* smiled—and trotted over.

"Thanks," he said, tucking the jar into his vest pocket.

"I don't know what I'd do without you."

The baker grinned. "Probably eat dry bread."

Up ahead, the scarf seller was re-tying her display. One ribbon whispered something about a missing blue thread.

Kippen stopped.

"That green one looks amazing today," he said, pointing with a paw.

She blinked. "Oh! You think so?"

"Definitely. Suits you."

The scarf seller beamed. Just a little. But it stuck.

And then—her.

The villager with the letters.

The one whose smile had trembled earlier like it wasn't sure it had permission.

She moved carefully across the cobblestones, arms full.

Kippen took a breath.

The kind you take before doing something brave in a small way.

“Those are a lot of letters,” he said gently.

“Bet you’ve got the best handwriting in town.”

She blinked.

Then smiled.

Not the kind that flickers.

The kind that *knows*.

“Well. I *do* take my time with it.”

Something fluttered in Kippen’s chest.

Not pride.

Not performance.

Something gentler.

Quieter.

Like a ribbon tying itself for the first time.

As he passed the fountain again, a breeze threaded through the voicekeeper chime—the same one as before.

It rang once, softly.

Then again.

Kippen sat. Looked up.

Then down, where the index card peeked from his vest pocket.

He pulled it out.

Read the words Gable had left him—words the wind had been waiting to say:

“You’re loved. *That’s what matters.*”

Kippen tilted his head. Smiled.

The villager with the letters walked on, unaware.

But this time, that felt okay.

Kippen turned toward home, tail flicking.

Today was still very Kippen.

Just... a little less lonely than before.