

IGHEMNI'S BANE

Ighemni had recently admitted to herself that she was getting old. The steep climb from the market square up the cobbled street and up the worn stone stairs had left her wheezing and gulping for air, with her heart thudding in her temples. She leaned heavily on the kitchen table, giving her body ample time to recover. She scrutinised the grey fur on the back of her hands fondly recalling how it had once been a deep, glossy black and almost like velvet to the touch. Overhead, the ancient beams of the old cottage creaked in sympathy with her joints.

She turned to pick up her door key but it was no longer where she thought she had put it. Looking around, puzzled, she spotted it on the dresser. *I'm sure that wasn't where I put you.* But this was now becoming a common occurrence and now it seemed she was at the mercy of a failing memory. She sighed in resignation and decided her attention might best be put to some baking.

Her darling Ayevae was coming for dinner and Ighemni had planned to make her favourite pie. The kitchen was soon transformed from a model of cleanliness to a baker's back room as Ighemni mixed, kneaded, chopped, diced, skinned, washed and baked. While she worked, the cottage's elderly timbers complained as if to say that they could no longer support the roof over her head. She managed to mislay her rolling pin twice, the flour once and her spoon on several occasions. And after much searching she eventually located the baking tray she needed in a cupboard where it shouldn't have been. But, like the moaning house, she put it down to old age. There was nothing she could do about it, so she proceeded as she did every day, apathetically accepting these inconveniences as a part of her life.

When Ayevae finally arrived, bursting enthusiastically through the little cottage door and running headlong into Ighemni's welcoming arms, the pie was almost done. A delicious aroma filled the kitchen which had more or less been returned to its former spotless condition.

"Hello, G'ma!" Ayevae bubbled.

"Well hello to you too," Ighemni beamed at her youngest grandchild. "Are you hungry?"

"Oh, yes!" Ayevae smiled up at her grandmother, her bright eyes twinkling with life. The setting sun streamed through the kitchen window lending a scarlet hue to the tan, soft fur of her face and causing the tips of her pointed ears to glow.

"Good, because it's almost ready. So if you lay the table, I'll just finish up here."

Ayevae happily agreed and as she set about putting cutlery and plates on the kitchen table, she relayed every last detail of her seemingly

adventurous day to Ighemni. Ayevae chatted away, Ighemni finished tidying - having to search for her spoon, yet again - and before long, the steaming pie was removed from the clay oven. Turning proudly to the table she found that Ayevae had laid it for three.

"Darling, there are only the two of us for dinner tonight."

"I know G'ma."

"Then why have you set a third place?"

"Don't you know," Ayevae laughed, "you're supposed to set a place for our Clanspirits. As a sign of respect."

"Where did you hear that?" Ighemni asked sternly, concern creasing her brow.

"Why, Pa told me so."

"Your Pa is filling your head with nonsense and lies," Ighemni stated angrily as she plonked the pie onto the table, "those evil creatures bring nothing but misery and death. Don't listen to what your father says, do you hear? He's been lied to about them and he's passing those lies on to you. So don't you listen to it. Understand?"

"Yes, but..."

"No 'buts' Ayvae. This is important. You must promise me that you'll ignore what he tells you about them." Ighemni glared at her granddaughter leaning ominously over the table towards her.

"Yes, G'ma," Ayevae acquiesced glumly.

"Promise me!"

"Okay, G'ma. I promise."

"Good! Now put away that setting and then we can eat."

Ayevae was somewhat confused, but she complied with her grandmother's wishes. From somewhere in the cottage a rafter cracked loudly. They sat in silence whilst Ighemni served. Ayevae tucked into her helping and the incident was soon forgotten. Ayevae swung her legs under the table as the pair of them merrily chattered to each other about Pa's up and coming fishing competition.

Twilight crept up on them and the house settled down for the night: beams creaked and moaned. Ighemni lit oil lamps to eat by and after a second helping for Ayevae it wasn't long before they were done and the plates lay empty; Ayevae announced that she thought her tummy might burst. They washed the dishes together and then, with a heavy heart, a hug and a big kiss, Ighemni sent her granddaughter home.

A full moon silvered the street as Ayevae ran along barefoot through a short tunnel cut into the sheer face of the tor and as she emerged on the other side the glint of something on the wayside caught her eye. Investigating, she found two coins: a three-bit and a nine-bit. This was a veritable treasure hoard. She ran home to tell her Ma and Pa.

As Ayevae was finding her bounteous riches, Ighemni was looking in her leather purse, confused. Tomorrow she had to purchase some more supplies for her weaving. She could've sworn that she'd put sufficient money for it into her purse. But it appeared that she would be twelve-bit short. *Oh well, she thought, I must be mistaken. I'll just get some more from my strong-box.*

Overhead, up in the rafters, a fickle but ancient being resembling a small, adult version of Ayevae, fur bristling with disdain, chuckled knowingly as it leant deliberately back against a timber and caused it to creak.