

BEWARE
THE
SPIDER

EMPAYA IBA SPEAKS

Empaya Iba, they call me,

My enemies and slaves.

To the people, I am Abah.

What say you?

I am Empaya Iba, spirit of the Black Orchid People,

Guardian of the Mother Soil, giver of the Long Sleep,

Seer of the Many Eyes, mage of the Many Legs.

Hear my words and know me.

The people of the midnight flower are my children;

Their land is mine own.

He who bears my mark serves me and mine.

Attend all who would harm me,

You winged creatures of the fire and light.

I am not what you see,

And my servant bears my power.

Come to me, you who would do me harm.

Seek me in my land.

Take the gift of the ebon blossom, and

Accept its eternal sleep.

My minion bears the mark of my home;

He will accept your oblation

And make your sacrifice.

Fear the one who bears my mark.

So say I—who am Abah and Empaya Iba.

CHAPTER 1

HEADS-UP

I KNEW IT WAS a mistake to pick up the buzzing phone. Amanda breathed quietly beside me, her naked back against my chest, my arm resting lightly on her hip.

The cell phone vibrated on the side table. *Zzzt*. Only one person called at this time of night, and I didn't want to hear whatever bad news he had to convey. But, even more, I didn't want him to waken Amanda. *Zzzt*. I disentangled myself as hastily as I could without rousing her. *Zzzt*.

I thumbed the face of my cell.

"Sebastian—"

With just one croak, the caller confirmed my suspicions. U.S. Marine Corps General Mike Owens was calling. And, yes, at this hour that could only mean bad news.

"Hold on," I whispered in a voice husky with sleep.

I slipped from under the gray satin sheets, grabbed the running shorts lying on the floor, and sneaked out of the bedroom to my study next door. The first golden rays of dawn filtered through the windows.

"Your secret's out!" my cell phone shouted.

I put the device to my face.

“What?”

“Your secret’s out,” Mike said, his voice gravelly from an injury I’d caused. “I have a team on the way. We’re establishing on-site protection, effective immediately.”

“Good morning to you, too, Mike.”

I slouched into my swivel chair and shivered as my bare back hit cool leather.

“Okay, Mike, what’s going on? You realize it’s not even dawn here Denver.”

“It’s still early here in DC, too, but I suspect you’ve been lying awake for hours trying to figure out your latest nightmare.”

I grunted my acknowledgment of another night of bad dreams featuring Empaya Iba, the spider demon. Iba intersects my life from time to time and gives me the power to kill people with my thoughts. For the last several weeks, the demon had played the same confusing nightmare in my head over and over. I didn’t know whether it was a warning or a prediction or just some part of my psychological makeup that reacts poorly to beans and rice, a favorite dish of mine.

Vines curl around my feet and legs, and creepers grab at my arms and torso. Above me, some kind of dreamlike, winged beast circles, its claws sharp and grasping. One blood-red eye meets mine.

I call out to the spider demon: “Iba. Empaya Iba!”

Above, the shadow glides closer in tighter and tighter circles, that red eye locked on me.

“Why, Iba?”

I search my memory, frantically trying to recall how I landed in this mess. The photo assignment from the sheikh, of course. The old Dyak woman offering me the rarest of rare flowers, the black orchid. The native’s dart. Three heads strung along a pole.

Is this all because of an orchid? A black orchid no Westerner has seen and lived to talk about. Except me.

Overhead, the creature shaves the treetops. Maybe the trees will slow it long enough for me to find a weapon to fight back.

“Sebastian Arnett.”

I feel the sound more than I hear it. Like sand tumbling onto a taut drumhead.

“Be still, Sebastian Arnett. Disappear as I do.”

A dark shadow flashes past my eyes. The creature. The voice distracted me, and I’d forgotten. It found a path through the trees. It’s going to attack before I can find Empaya Iba, I just know it.

“It sees only you, Sebastian Arnett. Empaya Iba is pleased.”

Grasping claws reach for my face—and my scream wakens me. Every time.

“Hello. Sebastian, are you there? Hello?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“As I was saying, this is critical. Have you heard from your buddy from Down Under?”

“Not recently,” I said, conjuring an image of Australian intelligence operative Jimmy Beam. “Why?”

“He tipped us a few hours ago.”

Mike coughed and cleared his throat, trying to expand his damaged vocal chords.

“The Chinese know all about you and have a search team combing through Borneo for connections to you. Given your profile there, it won’t take any time to track you to Denver. I thought maybe he would have alerted you first.”

“No,” I said, paying more attention. “No. I’ll have to have a chat with him. He thinks some Chinese are about to storm my door?”

“No. They’re in Borneo, but they could come knocking at any time. I’m not waiting until they do. I’m putting my people at Amanda’s house, and I don’t want any argument.”

I was in that strange space between being awake and being alert, when dream and reality merge and clarity comes slowly.

“Is it the Chinese government, or some mob-related group?”

“Since when are business and government different things?”

“Not my area of expertise. I guess it’s not all that surprising.”

I said, my brain gaining traction the longer I was awake. “This all started in their backyard, and they have a large presence in Borneo, mining, logging and everything else. That’s one reason the Australians keep such a close eye on things there.”

“I don’t care whose yard it is. It’s my football, and I don’t feel like playing,” Mike said.

“You are aware that I’m not a football and my life isn’t a game, right?” I said, more briskly than I’d intended. “You may think I’m just a piece in some game you’re playing and that you can order me around, but that’s not how it works.”

“Come on, Sebastian. Are you still asleep? You know our concerns about you—and that damned demon. It’s much better for everyone if we discourage threats against you or Amanda, or even T, I guess.”

Somewhere in the Pentagon, Mike exhaled his frustration, his voice growing even more hoarse. He spoke again, his voice lowered but firm: “We can’t let someone like you fall into hostile hands.”

“Someone like me?”

“Geez, you’re a pain in the ass. You want me to spell it out for you? Fine. You have the power to kill with your thoughts; distance doesn’t matter; and your body count in the last year is—What? A dozen or more. And most of them were my men!”

He paused.

“You have to be... I was going to say watched, but maybe chaperoned is a better word. The United States Government cannot even consider the possibility, however remote, that you would be used against our interests. I’ve done my best to stay out of your hair, but this is a real threat, and I’m—”

“I don’t want a security team in the house or on the property,” I said. “I can’t control what you do on the street and service alley. Amanda and I are trying to live normal lives here.”

The front doorbell hummed softly. I tapped the laptop in front of me, and our home security dashboard lit up. A camera aimed at

the front door popped open. Two men in desert camouflage stood on alert, their fingers resting beside the triggers of the assault weapons they carried.

“I assume these are your people at my door,” I said.

“If they rang the doorbell, they’re mine,” Mike said.

“Okay. Guess I gotta go.”

I punched the call to an end.

“Who was that?”

Amanda’s voice startled me. She leaned against the door, her curved figure wrapped in a long-sleeved, floor length maroon silk gown, her auburn hair sleep-tousled and her arms crossed over her chest.

“Hi. Sorry about that,” I said. “It was Mike. Why don’t you go back to bed? It’s still early.”

“There are two military vehicles in the circle out front,” she said. “Is that Mike’s doing?”

“Yeah. He wants to beef up security for a few days. No big deal.”

“Liar.”

“All right. Mike’s in full panic mode. He wants to station a team here. I told him no.”

“He must be very worried even to suggest that, much less do it without consulting us in advance.”

She padded barefoot across to my chair and settled onto my lap. I wrapped my arms around her.

“Are you worried?” she asked. “The ExecSecure people are at the front gate. Can’t they handle it?”

“If it were just me, I’d say they could. But Mike pointed out that the Chinese might not play by civilized rules,” I said.

“The Chinese?”

“Yep. All 1.4 billion are out looking for me, or so Mike says. Actually, Jimmy Beam says it from Australia; Mike just agrees and apparently has the troops to spare.”

We heard T answer the door, cursing a blue streak, demanding

to know what was going on, piling question on top of question and giving the soldiers no time to respond. For an instant, I felt sorry for the soldiers.

“Do you want me to call Mike?” she asked.

“It’s your home, babe. Your call.”

“Hmm. Deferring to me. That sounds ominous. You always leave me when you do that. Are you thinking of leaving?”

She kissed me on the head. Her robe slid open, exposing two perfect mounds of soft flesh.

“Not immediately, no. I’ve got some time if you do.”

“If you promise to talk later, I think I can free my schedule.”

She stood and pulled me by the hand back to her bed. I could—and would—worry about Mike and the Chinese and Empaya Iba later.