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## THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Thursday, July 5, 1990

McGriver's Gap, Plumas National Forest, California  
(Day Ten of Sapphire's Gathering)

The big drum only sounds well from afar.  
—Persian Proverb

### *SAPPHIRE*

The fire-glow ricocheted off the drenched and gleaming flesh of the dancers. The drums pulsated around the circle: *Boom, thump thump, boom. Boom, thump thump, boom.* First, the deep vibrations of the dununs, and then the *slap* and *wap* response of the djembes. Drummers hunched over the drums strapped to their chests and hanging between their legs in prayer, forearms and biceps taut and flexed. Sweat and fire smoke mingled with the pungent aroma of burning weed. Jutting chins and bouncing heads keeping a beat. Outside the circle, the meadow receded into the darkness and the cold and everything else beyond.

Sapphire dissolved into the *boom, thump, rumble* of a hundred throbbing drums. Her hands wove the rhythm into the bonfire, while she joined hundreds of voices chanting, "Hey yanna. Ho yanna. Hey yan yan." Her heart reverberated, and the thunderous roar of the drums compressed her lungs.

He had vaporized fifteen years ago, leaving faint traces of patchouli on her stuffed panda, the echo of an acoustic guitar in the hallway. Sapphire had painted him, twenty times or more, a pagan Jesus dancing barefoot in the park.

Her tombstone canvases stacked up in her mother's garage gathering dust and spiders. Her failed attempts to conjure his flesh had brought her to this gypsy gathering of ten thousand or more, tucked away in this isolated valley in the Sierras. For days, she had wandered the cobalt green meadows, speckled with golden wildflowers, and she'd struggled to recognize his smile on faces hidden behind beards, age, sorrow.

The tingling in her bones convinced her that her father would be here, somewhere. The drums mimicked his late-night storytelling voice. A sound so old, it reached beyond recorded history, beyond anything she could articulate. *Foommm, bloop, foommm, bloop.* A knowing that started in her feet and climbed up her body in waves. Fire, drums, hips moving. Her fingers flirted with the sky above: black canvas speckled with glitter.

Beside Sapphire, Lauren's left hand rubbed her own rounded belly.

"Hey, little one, do you like this?" Her right fingers kept the backbeat on a djembe. "Hey yanna, ho yanna, hey yan."

Sapphire tapped her fingers on Lauren's djembe. *Bump, slap wap, bump.* Lauren looked at her, laughing. Sapphire shrugged her shoulders. She felt easy with Lauren, even though they had only been friends for a few days. Different beats flowed together and made one groove that she wanted to stay in forever.

"The earth is our mother, we must take care of her," Kalmia called out.

They all responded, "The earth is our mother, we must take care of her."

Three sisters danced together in a bronze shimmer of moist skin; hips undulating in unison, fingertips touching, and breasts swaying. "Hey yanna, ho yanna, hey yan yan."

First, they teased a blonde drummer into a frantic beat and then a redhead into a languid rhythm.

Compared to the topless women in batik sarongs, Sapphire blended into the background of any situation. She tugged the rubber band off the end of her braid and swung her hair loose, fluffing it with her fingers. She shook her head—long, brown, white-girl hair. Around her, women had dreads wrapped in colorful ribbons. She tried to sway her hips, to be tribal, more mystical. More like Kalmia.

Kalmia, embodying Sapphire's image of an ancient goddess, undulated her hips to the music. Her purple robes shadowed her movements; her face and hair, the color of burnt sienna. The drummers' arms sped up. Harder, faster, louder. *Thump, slap, rumble*, blending to a frenzy. The voices grew silent, unable to keep the pace. The frenetic pace made Sapphire's body jerk as she tried to keep up. Heart pounding. Short gasps of air.

*BOOM!* The drums stopped in unison. The crowd shouted, screamed to the sky.

In the moment of stillness that was not quite silence, Sapphire saw her mother clutching a bucket of white paint, slashing a brush against the canvas of her sixth-grade attempt at his portrait, in her mom's mistaken belief that she could whitewash a thousand memories and erase his blood from her daughter's body. Sapphire had run crying to her room, slammed the door shut, and hid in the closet, muttering. *You're not my real mother.*