

# What the Thunder Said

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Mr. Nine sat in the shade of the baobab tree, his blanket of warez spread before him on the sand. He watched the *mzungu* girl walk up from the small cluster of bamboo huts on the beach towards him; she was young and wore mirrorshades under dirty-blonde dreadlocks that reached her shoulders and disappeared behind them. Freckles dusted her nose. It was midday; and Mr. Nine suddenly remembered an old saying about mad dogs and Englishmen, and smiled.

But the girl coming towards him did not smile back, and as she crouched in the sand opposite him, he watched the old man reflected in the mirrorshades stop smiling in sympathetic response, and reach protectively for the talisman hanging over his bare chest, the small gold disc that was as much a part of him as his name.

The girl said, "Madala," and lowered her head as she said, as was customary, "Muli bwanji?"

"Ndili bwino, zikomo," Mr. Nine said. *I am fine, thank you.* "Kaino, muli bwanji?"

The girl raised her head and said that she, too, was well. Then she said, quickly, as if afraid of more pleasantries to delay her, "Madala, I need your help. My friend is in trouble."

He remembered, later, her grateful expression as he rose without comment and gathered his warez, the small bottles of powders, the strangely shaped roots and the pieces of bark and the little round pills, and made to follow her. He remembered it when it was over, when she lay in the mud of Chambe Peak and the storm screamed above her in the voice of the thunder.

But for now, ignorant of the future, he only gathered the blanket and rose from the sand, no longer a young man, but also not, he liked to think, entirely old. His body was lean and there was a strength in his arms still, and as he moved after the girl he felt a restless energy tightening inside him like a premonition.

"When did you arrive in Cape Maclear?" he asked the girl. He had not seen her before, but then, there were always so many people, African as well as *mzungu*, who came and went by the shores of the lake; but he thought he would have remembered the girl.

"Yesterday," she said. "We came here from Blantyre." She turned her head, flicked a quick, uncertain glance; he could see the uneasiness even behind the shades. "Well, near there. In here."

They had reached the hut. It was made of cheap adaptoplant bamboo, an open-source release introduced sometime after the Selassie Wars. The bamboo spread like weed; and Mr. Nine, who had a long memory, suddenly recalled the joker that had released into the wild an updated version that produced THC, so that for several years after the event children were selling *chilms* made of the stuff to the tourists: ganja pipes that smoked themselves. He smiled, but when the girl with the dreadlocks rubbed the shack with the tips of her fingers and murmured to it until it opened a door, the smile was gone.

There was a boy lying on a mattress on the floor. He had short, dark hair and his skin was a faded tan.

"What's wrong with him?" Mr. Nine asked, but, even as he knelt down and felt the boy's skin, unnaturally cold, he knew the answer, and he turned and looked at the girl again and said, mildly, "Where did you say you came from again?"

She said, "We were climbing Mount Mulanje. I think. . . ." She knelt down beside him and took the boy's hand in hers. She looked suddenly ashamed. "We had a fight, and I . . . I left him. It was getting dark—we were climbing Chambe Peak. There was supposed to be an old hut still there, from when . . . when you were still allowed to climb on Malawi. I found it, and I waited for him there, but he didn't

