

THURSDAY'S CHILD

Something was upsetting the angels. Usually at that hour Arlo found dozens of them fluttering along the beach, scuffling their little bony hands through the mounds of drying seaweed to scare up crabs and sand fleas, which they caught and crunched in their toothy beaks. Most mornings, when he came in sight, dozens of them would start calling to him, their scratchy voices rising above the boom of the breaking surf: “A-a-arlo! Snacks? Snacksies?”

But that morning the beach was silent and deserted. The tide had gone a long way out, and even the sea was quiet. Despite the heat, the sky was gray, and had a strange look, as if the clouds had somehow curdled. Glancing up as he climbed his secret path onto the island’s high, rocky spine, Arlo thought this was what a fish might see if it looked up from inside the sea at the underbelly of the waves. His grandfather had grumbled that a storm was on the way.

He scrambled up onto the island's summit, hoping to find cooler air and some angels to talk to. No one had time for him at home that morning. His mother was busy with the new baby, who was grizzling at the heat. Father was down at the shipyards, overseeing the work on Senhor Leonidas's new copper-bottomed schooner. Grandfather was at work in his study. Arlo didn't really mind. He preferred it up here, on his own. He'd always been a solitary, thoughtful boy.

Following goat tracks through the gorse and heather, he approached the old abandoned watchtower, which stood on a crag high above the harbor. From there he could look down into his family's shipyards. The new schooner lay like a toy in the large pen with other ships, xebecs and barquentines and fine fast sloops, built or half built, in the lesser pens around it. Off-shore, the sea was scabbed with islands, but most of them were just barren rocks and angel rookeries, none as big or pleasant as Thursday Island. Away in the east, dark against the hazy shoreline of the mainland, squatted a conical crater. Smoke hung above it in the hot and strangely windless air, making it look as if it were getting ready to erupt. But it was no volcano. It had been formed in the long-ago by some powerful weapon of the Ancients, and the smoke came from the chimneys of the city that was built on its inner slopes. Mayda-at-the-World's-End was the finest city in the world, and Arlo's family were its finest shipwrights, even if they did choose to live outside it, safe and private here upon their island.