

## 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.

He left the tower and climbed a little higher, intent on the tiny white specks that were the sails of fishing boats scattered around Mayda's harbor mouth, and suddenly, as he reached the stones at the very top of the island, angels were soaring past him, their wide white wings whizzing and sougling as they tore though the air. A few of them recognized him and he heard them call his name: "A-a-arlo! A-a-arlo! W-a-a-a-a-ve!" So he waved, and they swung past him and out across the sea and back again, following curious zigzag flight paths as if they were trying to elude a predator. He glanced up, expecting to see a hawk or sea eagle hanging in the sky's top, but there was nothing, only those curdled clouds.

He watched the angels for a while, trying to understand the way they tipped and twitched their wings to steer themselves. He pulled two leaves from a bush, found a forked twig of heather on the ground, and spent a little while constructing an angel of his own. He climbed onto a rock and threw it like a dart, and just for a moment its leaf-wings spread to catch the air and he thought it would fly, but it only fell. He lost interest in it before it even hit the ground, and looked away westward, sensing something.

Above all the black stacks and wherries, where the angels roosted, fretful clouds of them were twisting, turning the sky into a soup of wings. And beyond them, far off across the ocean . . .

Something had gone wrong with the horizon.

Just then his favorite of the angels, the fledgling he called Weasel, landed beside him like a feather football. Arlo groped in

his pocket for the crusts of stale bread he always brought with him, expecting Weasel to ask for snacks. But Weasel just made the same noise the others were all making. “Wa-a-ave!”

“What? What’s that, Weasel?”

“Wa-ave come!” Weasel had more words in him than the others of his flock. He was learning not to let his bird voice stretch them out of shape. Grandfather said he was a throwback, almost as clever as the angels of old. He hopped from foot to foot and fluffed out his feathers and wagged his fingers in alarm, trying to make Arlo understand. “Wa-ave come here! Danger! Big-big!”

“A wave?” said Arlo, and looked again to the west, from where a sudden wind was blowing.

The horizon heaved and darkened. It swelled into the sky. Arlo listened. He could hear the hammers at the shipyards and the maids laughing in the house, and a distant sound that lay beneath it all, so vast and low that he wondered if it had always been there. Perhaps this was the noise the world made, turning around on its axis. But how had he never noticed it before?

“Wa-a-a-a-ave!” screamed all the angels, and the sky flexed and shuddered and Arlo understood, and then he was up and running. But how can you hope to outrun the horizon?

After ten paces he looked back and saw it clearly: a blade of gray water sweeping toward him over the face of the sea. It hit the outermost of the islands and there was a brief explosion of spindrift and they were gone and the wave came on, white and

broken now, like a range of snow-covered mountains uprooted and running mad.

“Wa-a-a-ave!” he started to shout, just like the angels, as brainless as an angel in his terror. But who could hear him, above the world-filling voice of the sea?

He ran and tripped and fell and rolled and scrambled through the heather, down out onto the crag where the watchtower stood. A hundred feet below him the men in the shipyards were setting down their tools, standing, starting to run. From down there he doubted they could see the wave, but they must be able to hear it. . . .

There was a smack like thunder as it struck the cliffs at the island’s western end. White spray shot high into the sky, and dropped on Arlo as a storm of rain. The weight of it punched him back against the stones of the watchtower wall. It plastered him there; and past him rolled the wave, or part of it, a fat, foam-marbled snake of sea squeezing itself through the straits that separated Thursday Island from its neighbors, lapping at the high crag where he stood.

And when it was gone, the thunder and the spray and the long, shingle-sucking, white, roaring, hissing rush of it, he peeled himself from the tower’s side already knowing what he was going to see. Or, rather, not see. Because his home, his family, the shipyards, and the ships they had held were all gone, swiped aside by the sea’s paw and dragged down into drowning deeps so bottomless that not a spar or a splinter or a scrap of cloth would ever surface, and he was alone on Thursday Island with the angels.



# 2

## IN MAYDA-AT-THE-WORLD'S-END

In the long, lilac twilight of a midsummer's evening, Ruan Solent ran between the land-barges, which were parked up on the fairground behind the busy harbor.

In London, where Ruan came from, these barges were called "Summertown," and he'd looked forward every year to their arrival. Now he was a part of their convoy, a traveler himself, and he knew that their proper name was Bargetown, and that they kept rolling through every season, not just summer, carrying their shops and entertainments all over Europa, even here, to Mayda-at-the-World's-End.

The fairground where they had parked was a weed-speckled, empty lot between tall warehouses, swept clear of buildings by the great wave that had struck the World's End nearly ten years before, the same wave that broke over Thursday Island and destroyed the shipyards there. But Ruan was only ten, and he had arrived in Mayda just that afternoon. He had never heard of Thursday

Island. He had heard people talk about the giant wave (the *Ondra Del Mãe* they called it in these parts), but it was an unreal and storybookish thing to him, just another colorful disaster out of history.

Anyway, Ruan had more immediate disasters to worry about. His land-barge, the traveling theatre called *Persimmon's Electric Lyceum*, was supposed to raise its curtain at sundown, and already the sky was freckled with the first pale stars and, in the steep streets of the city, the lamps were being lit. So Ruan was rushing, weaving, burrowing his way through the crowd of sightseers and shoppers that swirled between the barges. Behind him he could hear his friends Max and Fergus bellowing through their brass trumpets to attract an audience. "Take your places at the *Lyceum*! Take your places for *Niall Strong-Arm*; or, *The Conquest of the Moon*!" Some of the people Ruan was pushing past looked interested, and started to make their way toward his barge, but Ruan just ran even faster away from it. He knew that without him and his fleet feet and bony elbows, the show could not begin.

"'Scuse me!" he hollered, as he jabbed and ducked his way past a fat, silky merchant. "Scoozi! Scoozey-mwa!" he shouted, bulldozing onward. (He was a much-traveled boy, and knew a little of all the languages of Europa.) He was as thin as a pipe-cleaner sculpture and as brown as a hazelnut, with a dandelion clock of sun blond hair and a sudden white grin that helped people forgive him when he bumped into them. Maydan fisher-folk in their temple-going best looked down and made way for

him. Pretty ladies smiled sweet smiles as they stepped aside to let him pass. “’Scuse me!” he kept on shouting. “Scoozey-mwa!”

All afternoon the barges had been crawling into Mayda, edging their way out along the zigzag causeway that tethered the crater to the mainland, squeezing through a cleft in its wall into the city. The *Lyceum* had been one of the first to arrive, and while her crew was busy setting out the stage and seating, other barges had parked up all around her. Not just the familiar ones that had been traveling with Bargetown all season but a second convoy, too, come down from Nowhere and the Caps Del Norte to set up shop here at the World’s End.

Ruan recognized one of the newcomers: an old blue traveling market called the *Rolling Stone*. It was such a recent arrival that its engines were still cooling and sea spray from the causeway crossing dripped like rain off its wheel arches and its underparts, but its merchants had already set out their wares, and a queue of eager shoppers was edging up its gangplank. Ruan scurried up past them to the turnstiles at the top, where one of the men on duty tried to stop him squirming underneath, but the other said, “Oh, let him through, Allan; it’s only that Solent boy from Persimmon’s theatre. . . .”

He waved a thank-you, running out onto the market deck. It was crammed with stalls and little cluttered shops, already busy with shoppers under its fluttering awnings. A woman blocked Ruan’s way, holding up a bolt of cloth against herself and asking her bored husband his opinion. “You ought to go and see the



play, master,” Ruan told him, swerving past. “It starts in a couple o’ minutes.” And right on his cue, his words were answered by a distant farting of brass bugles from the far end of Bargetown, announcing that the *Lyceum* was preparing to raise its curtains.

Ruan knew that by now the audience would have gathered in front of the apron-shaped stage that extended from the theatre’s stern. The first night in a new town always meant a big crowd. The seats would be full, and people would be sitting on the ground, too, or standing at the back, or watching from the windows of nearby buildings. Max and Fergus would be going around with their cash satchels, selling last-minute tickets. The closed curtains would look calm and classy, and give no hint of the panic boiling behind them, where Ambrose Persimmon would be trying out his big stage voice, “Me, me, me, me, me-me-mee!” while Alisoun Froy helped him into his first-act costume. Fern, Ruan’s small sister, would be sneezing in the fog of face powder that filled the ladies’ dressing room as she hared this way and that among the racks of hanging gowns, on frantic errands for frantic actresses. Mistress Persimmon would have lost her tiara as usual and Lillibet would be sobbing that she had put on weight and couldn’t fasten the hooks and eyes on the back of her bodice . . . and all that effort, all that fuss and worry, would be for nothing if Ruan didn’t make it back within the next two minutes!

At the untidy sternward end of the market deck was a stall called *Squinter’s Old-Tech Improbabilities*. Its owner, Mort Squinter, was haggling about something with a large man in a broad-brimmed

hat and travel-stained blue cloak. Ruan waited a bit, bouncing from foot to foot with impatience, then interrupted. "If you please, Master Squinter, we need some copper wire."

"Ain't you got none of your own?" asked Squinter, squinting down at him.

"We *did* have, Master Squinter, but AP used it to make his costume more magnificent and he forgot to tell us and now there's none left and a fuse has blown and we must do the show in darkness unless you can help us. Mistress Persimmon said you'd be sure to help. . . ."

(Mistress Persimmon had said nothing of the sort, but everyone on the *Lyceum* knew that Mort Squinter was in love with their leading actress, kept her portrait under his pillow and kissed it each night before he went to sleep. Ruan guessed that his request might go down better if it seemed to come from her.)

"Well," said the love-struck Squinter, blushing as he rummaged through the stacks of tiny wooden drawers behind his counter. "It's not cheap, your actual copper, not nowadays when so much is shipping north to London. But of course if it's for Laura Persimmon . . ." He looked to his other customer, hoping the man wouldn't lose interest and wander off to try some other stall while he was busy with Ruan. "Beg pardon for the interruption, sir. This boy's from *Persimmon's Lyceum*, at the far end o' the line. We traveled with 'em all last season. They have a wench from London who arranges their 'lectric lamps and stage effects and such, and there's never a performance goes by without this lad of

hers comes scavenging for some piece of 'tech or other. It's not as if Laura Persimmon ain't radiant enough without old-fangled lights shining on her."

"She knows the secrets of Electricity then, this Londoner?" the traveler asked. "What is her name?"

Squinter, still nosing in those drawers, scratched his head and said, "She's called Fever Biscuit. No, Fever Crumble . . ."

"Fever Crumb," said Ruan firmly, and the traveler turned and stared down at him with a look that was difficult to fathom.

"Aha!" said Master Squinter triumphantly, holding up a scrap of cardboard around which a few inches of wire was wound. Ruan snatched it from him with a mumbled thank-you and was gone, vanishing back into the crowd before Squinter could finish shouting, "What about payment?"

"Ask AP after the show!" Ruan yelled over his shoulder. Squinter shouted something else, but by then Ruan was halfway down the gangplank, visible only as a ripple of disturbance moving away through the crowds. "'Scuse me — Scoozey — Scoozey-mwa . . ."

The Lyceum's stage front reared up dark against a sky stitched all over with stars as bright as moth holes in an awning. The curtains billowed and filled in the soft breeze as if they were breathing. The crowd quieted, sensing that things were about to begin. They all knew the story of the play, for it was based on the old legend of the astro-knight Niall Strong-Arm, who flew to the moon in Apollo's fiery chariot and won the love of the moon goddess. What they were wondering was how would the Persimmon

company fit a fiery chariot and the moon's white gardens onto that tiny speck of stage?

Well, *not at all*, thought Ruan. Not unless he was quick. He flung himself up the steps at the backstage entrance and fell through the hatch into the bustle and commotion within. The air was thick with the smells of greasepaint and armpits, the tiny, stuffy corridors a maze of shadows and confusion, lit by bobbing lanterns. Alisoun Froy was kneeling at the shrine, saying a pre-show prayer to the goddess Rada who was supposed to watch over all theatre people. As Ruan dodged past her, Mad King Elvis of America loomed out of the darkness ahead of him with his rhinestone armor all aglitter and his vast black wig grazing the passage walls on either side. "Oh, this is just too beastly, darling!" he complained. "It's a disaster! This would never have happened if we had stuck to using oil lamps and reflectors! Why did AP ever agree to let the girl electrify us?"

Ruan squeezed past him without answering. Cosmo Lightly always found something to panic about before curtain-up. He passed Dymphna and Lillibet, too, who were complaining in whispers that their careers would be ruined, and then Fern, who was to play one of the ladies-in-waiting in Scene Two and was busy practicing her single line — "Yes, my lady. Yes, my lady. Yes, my lady!" — in different voices with her toy dog, Noodle Poodle, for an audience. He scrambled down a companion ladder and ran aft past the wood stacks and through the engine room where the big boilers slept in silence and the batteries hummed.

Then along a tight passageway and into the cramped burrow beneath the stage, where Fever Crumb was waiting for him.

And where Fever was, everything felt calm, even when it was a minute past curtain and not a footlight or a spotlight or a back-stage glim lit anywhere in the *Lyceum* and you could hear the crowd outside starting to make that mumbling, sullen sound that comes off disappointed crowds and the heavy footsteps of Master Persimmon crossing and recrossing the stage above your head as he paced about waiting to begin his first soliloquy.

Fever came to meet him, lighting the way with the flashlight she'd made for herself. She took the wire and smiled a thank-you at him. She was fairly new to smiling, having been brought up among Engineers who did not approve of it, and she wasn't really very good at it — she kept her lips tightly closed and her mouth went down at one end and up at the other. Some people might not have recognized it as a smile at all, but Ruan knew what it meant. He stood there feeling proud and happy holding the flashlight for her while she went to the open fusebox, her clever fingers unwrapping the precise length of wire that she needed and twirling it around and around till it broke off the coil.

She had already stripped out the blown fuse. She wrapped the wire around this terminal, then around that, making a bridge for the 'lectric particles to swarm across, while Ruan watched her. She was sixteen, tall and bony with a strange face that was all angles, and large, watchful eyes that didn't match: one gray, one brown. Her hair, which she punished with a hard brush every

morning and scraped back into the tightest of buns, was every shade of fair from white to honey, and her old gray linen shirt and canvas trousers were smeared with oil and grease and stained with sweat. In Ruan's opinion (which no one ever asked for, him being only ten) there was no one in the world as lovely as Fever Crumb.

She glanced at him with a little frown, as if she wondered why he was staring at her, then reached for the lever on the wall that turned the power on. Anyone else would have crossed their fingers for luck at that moment, or said a prayer to Rada, but not Fever Crumb. She knew that crossing her fingers couldn't affect the universe, and she was always telling Ruan and his sister that there were no such things as gods or goddesses. But Ruan couldn't help himself; he crossed as many fingers as he could, behind his back where Fever couldn't see, and he said a prayer as well, not just to Rada but to the gods of far-off London, too: Poskitt and Mad Isa and the Duke. . . .

The lever came down. The dim red working lights winked on. From outside came a noise like a big wave breaking, and Ruan realized that it was the sound of the audience applauding as the curtains suddenly flamed bloodred in the glare of Fever's lights.



Few people in Mayda had ever seen such lights as those before. The knowledge of Electricity had survived from Ancient times before the Downsizing, but like all the old knowledge it was spread unevenly. Great cities such as London had buildings made

of stone and salvage-plastic and lit at night by 'lectric lanterns, but on the wild Atlantic coasts of the World's End in those days you were more likely to find grass-roofed huts and tallow candles. In some of the settlements that Bargetown had visited that season, people thought that its land-barges were magic, and were wary of approaching too close for fear of the demons they thought they heard agrowling and agripping in their engine rooms.

The Maydams were not so primitive as that, but they had a distrust of technology and they mostly did without engines and devices. They had never seen anything like the clean, bright light that burst upon them as the *Lyceum* opened its curtains.

The light grew brighter still, illuminating a stage dressed as a castle, with purple-headed mountains (painted by Fergus Bucket and Ruan) stretching off into a smoky distance. A wind was blowing (that was Max Froy standing in the wings, huffing into a conch shell and fanning dead leaves across the set). Clouds sailed across the painted sky, thanks to an invention of Fever's own: a disc with cloud shapes cut in it spinning in front of one of her floodlights. Dappled by their shifting shadows, Niall Strong-Arm paced the battlements, a figure out of legend sprung to life, looking slightly older than most people had imagined him, but splendid nonetheless, with all those trails and squirlies of melted-down copper wire gleaming on his armor and the gold visor on his helmet shining in the glow of the extraordinary lamps. Awed, the audience fell silent as he began his first speech.

Fever and Ruan, crouched in the crawl space beneath him, had other surprises in store. Tall jars full of salt water surrounded them, each with an electric terminal in its base and another dangling into it on a wire. Electricity flowed from one terminal to the other through the water, completing a circuit that kept the lamps alight. But night was meant to be falling in the play, so while Cosmo Lightly entered and started to tell Sir Niall of his plan to conquer the Moon, Ruan pulled a cord that raised the dangling terminals higher and higher up inside the jars. With more water to flow through, the current grew weaker, partly spending itself as heat. The jars steamed. Up on stage the light grew dimmer and dimmer. Cosmo raised one rhinestone arm and told the astro-knight, "So go you, good Sir Niall, to the Moon/ And tell its guardian goddess even she/Must to Good King Elvis bend her knee." Then Fever flipped a switch that turned on a masked spotlight and threw a perfect crescent moon onto the sky above the cardboard parapets.

Crouched between the simmering jars, she heard the audience's sigh and knew that she'd astonished them again. That pleased her. Unlike Ruan, she'd never fallen for the magic of the theatre, and still thought that plays were so much silly nonsense. But she hoped that maybe there would be someone out there in that crowd who would be more moved by the brilliance of her lights than by the silly love story unfolding under them, and would look into Electricity for themselves and come to see how simple it was, really, to generate and harness. Then she would



have played a small part in restoring science and reason to this backward portion of the world.

Or maybe that was just an excuse, a kindly lie she told herself to help her deal with the fact that Fever Crumb, trained in the ways of science and reason by London's Order of Engineers, had spent two years traveling across Europa on a mobile theatre and helping its crew of actors stage their foolish shows.

She switched on her flashlight to check her crumpled copy of the playscript, even though she knew the show by heart. There was a short scene front-of-curtain with Max Froy as the clown before Niall Strong-Arm climbed aboard the fiery chariot, when the red spotlight and the fire effect would be required. Time to fetch a cup of water from the pail in the corner. If the Maydans liked her moon, then the fiery chariot should *really* please them. . . .

Yes, it was an unlikely job for an Engineer, but she liked to think that she did it rather well.