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opening extract from

A Web of Air

written by

Philip Reeve

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PHILIP REEVE

A WEB OF AIR

SCHOLASTIC

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Thursday's Child



omething 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 that were strewn along the tideline, scaring 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 grey, and had a strange look; as if the clouds had somehow curdled. Looking up as he climbed his secret path on to the island's high, rocky spine, Arlo thought that 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 on to 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, which 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 harbour. 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. Offshore, 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 when some powerful weapon of the Ancients slammed into the earth, 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 which were the sails of fishing boats scattered around Mayda's harbour 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 soughing as they tore though the air. A few of them recognized him and he heard them call his name; "A-aa-arlo! A-aa-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 some 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 on 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 westwards, 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 favourite 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 waggled 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 round 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 grey water sweeping towards 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 back through the heather, out on to 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 neighbours, 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 which 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.