

The  
**MISTMANTLE**  
CHRONICLES  
BOOK TWO

*Urchin and the Heartstone*

M.I. McALLISTER

*The*  
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**Urchin *and the* Heartstone**

*by*  
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*illustrated by*  
**Christine Enright**

*Purple House Press*  
Cynthiana, Kentucky



## *For Marilyn Watts and Alison Sage*

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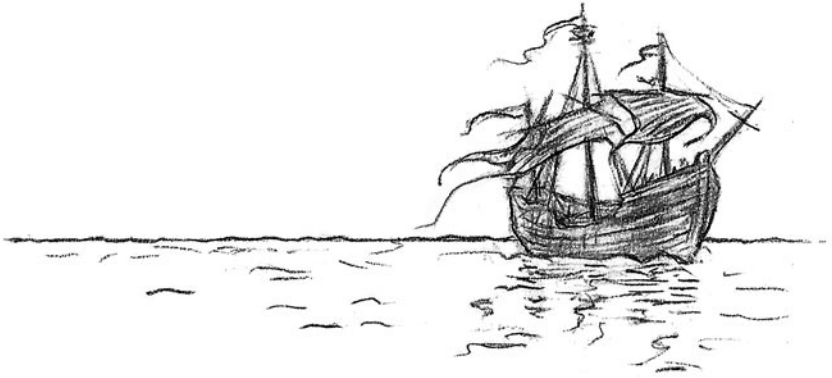
Summary: Urchin and the other inhabitants of Mistmantle look forward to a  
time of peace with the coronation of Crispin the squirrel, but the arrival of a  
storm-ravaged ship with a delegation from the island of Whitewings not only  
delays the ceremony but sends Urchin on a perilous journey that changes his  
life forever.

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***Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall  
Still be my vision, thou ruler of all.***

—Eighth-century Irish hymn,  
translated by Mary Byrne, versified by Eleanor Hull





*Over the water*

*The Secret will bring them.*

*Moonlight, Firelight,*

*The Holy and the True,*

*The Secret will draw them home.*

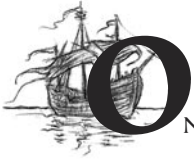
—Brother Fir







## PROLOGUE



**O**N THE ISLE OF WHITEWINGS, three animals met in an underground chamber by night. One was Brother Flame, a tall, thin squirrel in a priest's tunic. The second was Larch, a small female hedgehog with a serious, pointed face. And the third was Cedar, a squirrel the color of firelight, darting urgently into the chamber.

"It's too late," she said. "They've gone."

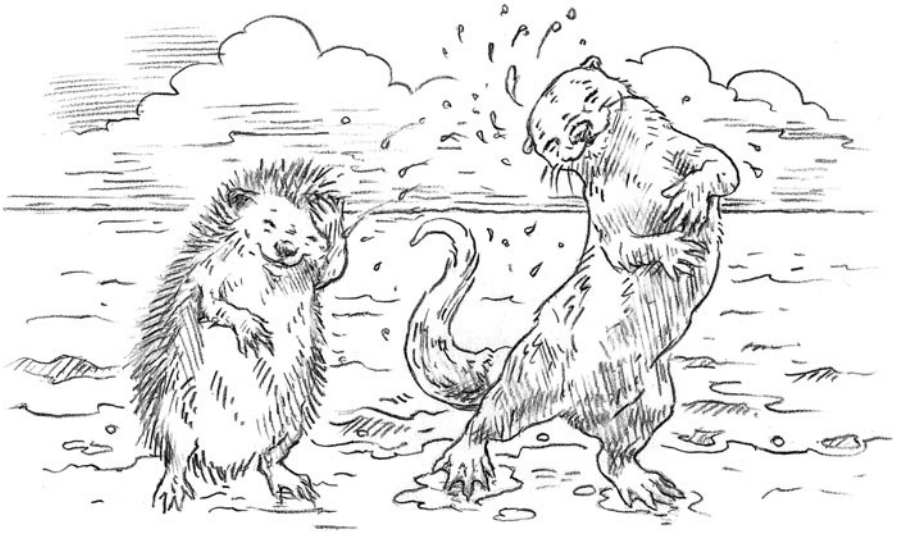
"Then they're sure to find the squirrel and bring him here," said Flame gravely. "They won't dare come back without him."

"He'll be in great danger," said Larch. "Did you find out his name?"

"Urchin," said Cedar. "Urchin of Mistmantle."

She spoke the island's name carefully, as if it were something precious. Cedar had never been to Mistmantle, but she had dreamed of it all her life.





## CHAPTER ONE



**W**ILD SEAS AND STORMING RAIN had battered the coast of Mistmantle all night, making squirrels scurry down from lurching treetops and hide in the roots. But by morning the gale had passed and the island lay washed and sparkling, with the wet stones of Mistmantle Tower gleaming pale pink and gold in the summer light. Squirrels darting from the windows on errands scabbled to keep their grip as they ran down the walls. On the rocks around the tower, columns of moles saluted and stood to attention, as Captain Lugg the mole had trained them, and in the tower itself there was breathless bustle. The island was preparing for the coronation of Crispin the squirrel.

Delicious wafts of spice and heat came from the kitchens, where moles, squirrels, and hedgehogs chopped nuts, lifted sticky golden cakes from ovens, and hung bunches of mint in the windows to keep

the flies away. Otters piled up casks of wine in the cellars. Dancers and choirs ran up and down stairs looking for somewhere to practice; acrobats rehearsed on turrets and hung up tightropes, which Mother Huggen the Hedgehog used as washing lines for the choir robes; and young animals hurried from the Spring Gate with splashing buckets of cold water for thirsty animals. Hedgehogs struggled to carry robes and Threadings down the stairs to the vast Gathering Chamber, where carpenters sawed and hammered to finish a new gallery.

The Gathering Chamber was the most impressive room on the island, but today it was crammed with stacked-up benches, robes, busy animals preparing for the coronation, and more animals trying to look busy so they'd be allowed to stay and help. Threadings, the stitched, woven, and painted pictures showing the stories of the island, lay draped across chairs until somebody could hang them up. In the middle of all this, Urchin, a young squirrel with unusually pale fur, was trying to find a way out.

Captain Padra the Otter had given him a very simple order—"Just nip down to the shore, Urchin, and ask Arran to come up"—but it was easier said than done. Urchin may have been Captain Padra's page and a Companion to the King, but at this moment he didn't feel at all significant. He was just a very young squirrel trying to get out the door while a dozen large hedgehogs carrying stepladders were coming the other way; and somebody had just left a stack of cushions in the doorway because there was nowhere else to put them. It was easiest to jump out of a window and run down the tower wall.

The fresh, warm air was wonderful, and sunshine soaked into his fur. He delivered his message to Padra's wife, Captain Arran, who jammed her captain's circlet onto her rough, tufty fur and made her way around the tower to the Gathering Chamber.

Urchin paused for a moment, absorbing the sun and the fresh sea breeze. A few leisurely otters rowed, fished, and taught their little ones to swim in the shallows as if they didn't know a thing about a coronation or the flurry in the tower. It was late summer, too beautiful a day to spend it all in the tower. He looked out to sea, and looked again.

Enchanted mists surrounded Mistmantle. No animal who truly belonged to the island could leave by water and return by water. The mists prevented it, and few ships found their way through them to the island. But something was moving in the mists now. Shading his eyes with his paw, Urchin watched. First he saw something, then he didn't, then he did. He should let Padra know.

He ran around the tower again and skimmed up to the window of the Gathering Chamber. As his best friend, Needle, a young female hedgehog, was spreading red velvet cushions on the window seat, he was very nearly knocked back down again. He managed to keep his balance and scramble over, but Needle's spines were exceptionally sharp, and he couldn't avoid being pricked. He wriggled his way through the crowd to Padra and caught the smile on his face, but Padra always looked as if he were about to laugh.

"Captain Arran is on her way, sir," he said, "and I think there's a ship coming. Something's moving in the mists."



“Strange,” commented Padra. “Visitors for the coronation?” Needle glanced around the Gathering Chamber as if trying to work out where to put them.

“You two, go and have a good look,” said Padra. “Send word if you need me, but I’ll be down presently. Get a bit of fresh sea air and sunshine. And, Urchin, look out for a squirrel called Juniper.”

“Juniper?” repeated Urchin.

“Young squirrel, bit younger than you two, dark fur,” said Padra. “He has a crippled hind paw so he was brought up in hiding, but he’s free now. He needs to get to know other animals. He’s had a lonely sort of life and lived among otters more than squirrels, which hasn’t done him any harm, of course, but he needs to meet other young squirrels. I mentioned you, and it turned out that his foster mother had already told him about how you brought Crispin back to Mistmantle. He really wants to meet you.”

“Captain Padra, sir!” called someone, and Padra was hurried away by a hedgehog carrying a robe. Urchin ran down the tower wall again and waited on the shore until Needle, trundling over the rocks, caught up. There was no sign of anything in the mists now; maybe it had just been a trick of the sunlight.

“That must be Juniper,” said Needle. At the water’s edge stood a squirrel who looked a little younger than Urchin, thinner and darker than most squirrels. One hind paw was small and curled. Not long before, Captain Husk had tried to have all weak or injured young animals put to death, and many of them had been brought up in hiding.

Juniper must have heard his own name, because he turned so that Urchin could see a pointy face. Juniper had been watching them shyly, as if waiting to see whether they would be friends or not and hoping they would, and Urchin knew what that was like. He himself had always been “that very pale squirrel,” the orphan squirrel, the odd one out. He scampered down the sand, followed by Needle, and Juniper twitched a nervous smile. His eyes were dark and bright as berries.

“Are you Juniper?” asked Urchin. “I’m Urchin.”

“A Companion to the King!” said Juniper with admiration.

Urchin tried to make the sort of easy, laughing reply that Captain Padra would have come up with, but unfortunately he couldn’t think of one. “Um...suppose so,” he said, and nodded at Needle. “Needle’s a Companion to the King, too. Where are you from?”

Juniper turned and pointed toward the forest stretching out to the west and rising into the hills. “Do you see, sir, between the trees, just beyond the dark row of firs?” he said, and his voice was soft with shyness. “Past there, sir, there’s a waterfall.”

“I’m not a sir,” said Urchin. “You lived at the top of the waterfall?”

“No, s—no,” said Juniper. “Behind it, in the caves halfway down. Damson the squirrel found me when I was a baby, and looked after me. I never went anywhere else much because she had to keep me hidden, but now I’d like to live in the wood.” His ears twitched. “So long as I can still see Damson, that is. She brought me up, and she’s old now. She shouldn’t be alone.” He looked down shyly at his paws, then up at the tower. “Who are all those hedgehogs?”

Urchin and Needle turned to look. A group of tall male hedgehogs stood in a huddle on the rocks.

“They’re some of the Hedgehog Host,” said Needle. “It was one of Husk’s ideas. When Husk was in power, the strongest of the male hedgehogs were sent away to do mining and quarrying right over on the North Corner, in the Rough Rocks. Even married hedgehogs with families, like Docken—he’s Thripple’s husband, Hope’s daddy—they all had to go. They’ve been set free now, but they still sort of stay together and call themselves the Hedgehog Host. Some of them might be promoted to the Circle, like Docken and...um...that tall one that all the hedgehog maids fancy. Gorsen. Gorsen the Gorgeous, or at least he thinks he is. Gorsen and Docken work at the tower.”

“That must be good,” said Juniper with a wistful look that Urchin understood. Juniper was a bit like himself a year ago, when he had longed to be a tower squirrel, but didn’t like to say so. A very wet otter was loping up the shore toward them, smiling brightly. When he reached them he screwed up his face and shook himself dry with a flurry of spray.

“Fingal!” said Needle. “You did that on purpose!”

“Just the thing for a hot day,” said Fingal, who was Padra’s younger brother and had the same pleasant look about him.

“Have you seen any sign of a ship, Fingal?” asked Urchin. There was still no sign of it, perhaps it was steering around the island, trying to find a way through the mists.

“No,” said Fingal, and glanced over his shoulder. “Still no. Should I? Oh, hello, Juniper. Don’t often see you here.”

“So you two know each other?” said Needle.

“The otters sort of brought me up, too,” explained Juniper.

“Don’t know about bringing him up, but you know how it is,” said Fingal. “Where there’s water, there’s always an otter or two. Nobody has a clue who Juniper’s parents are, Damson found him all by himself and kept him secret in the days when they killed anything with half a whisker out of place; so we all taught him the really useful things, like swimming and sliding down waterfalls.”

“I don’t know who my parents are, either,” said Urchin to Juniper. “Apple the squirrel looked after me.”

“Oh, I know about *you*,” said Juniper with admiration. “Only, living where I did, I didn’t get to hear about everything that happened on the island. I’ve heard bits of the story, about Captain Husk and everything, but—”

“Oh, it’s simple,” interrupted Fingal. “King Brushen was the king, but it was Husk who really made all the rules. Husk was so clever nobody realized just how bad he was, him and his Lady Aspen. Husk had Crispin sent into exile. My brother Padra took Urchin as his page and taught him to do all those pagey things, and Urchin went off to find Crispin, and now Crispin’s the king. He hasn’t been crowned yet, but he’s still the king. That’s all. Anyone want to skim stones?”

Urchin understood more and more why Captain Padra had kept his talkative, carefree young brother out of the way while Husk was

in power. Fingal chose two round, flat pebbles and loped down to the shore with them. Needle edged closer to Urchin, who turned to face her so he wouldn't be prickled.

"No ship," she said. "If there was one, I expect it had to turn back. They usually do. Do you think Juniper can manage to skim stones? I mean, with his bad hind paw. His balance must be affected."

"I won't show him up," Urchin whispered back. Fingal flicked a pebble across the water and watched it skip twice before it sank. Needle's throw wasn't good, and as Juniper seemed to be holding back, Urchin went next. He couldn't quite bring himself to make a hopeless throw, but it wasn't a good one either. The stone bounced once, and sank.

"Your turn, Juniper," he said.

The pebble flew from Juniper's paw. Once, twice, three, four, five times it skimmed over the water. Urchin gave a gasp of admiration.

"Well done!" called Needle and Urchin. Juniper turned and smiled shyly, as if he thought he should apologize.

"The otters taught me that," he said.

"Can you teach me?" asked Urchin. For a moment he was afraid he'd said the wrong thing—it was as if he were asking to know Juniper's secret—but he soon realized it was exactly the right thing. He had put Juniper in charge.

"It's—it's all in the wrist," said Juniper, clearly astonished to find himself teaching anything to Urchin. "You do it like this."

They went on skimming stones, as Urchin improved his aim and

Juniper grew more confident. By the time they were running out of suitable stones, Urchin felt as if he'd known Juniper for years. They were friends, and he knew they always would be. It was as simple as that.

"There's a whole heap of stones by the jetty," said Fingal. "The ships use them for ballast, but you can always find a few for skimming."

"What's ballast?" asked Juniper.

"Rubbishy stuff for putting in ships to make the right weight," said Fingal. "But nobody minds if we skim them." He turned to look for a flat stone, then suddenly straightened up and seemed to be watching something. "Look! Look, can you see that?"

All of them looked out to sea as Fingal pointed. Slowly, still misted and unclear, a ship was emerging. They watched her, minute by minute, the mists still hanging thinly about her like smoke. The pebbles were left untouched. Urchin called to two young mole sisters nearby, Jig and Fig, and sent them to tell Padra and the king.

He had expected billowing sails and flags, maybe, hung from the masts, coming to celebrate Crispin's coronation. But the ship that now appeared looked as if the previous night's storm had battered her into defeat. The mast tip hung crooked, the sails were in tatters, and she limped to the island like a dying animal.