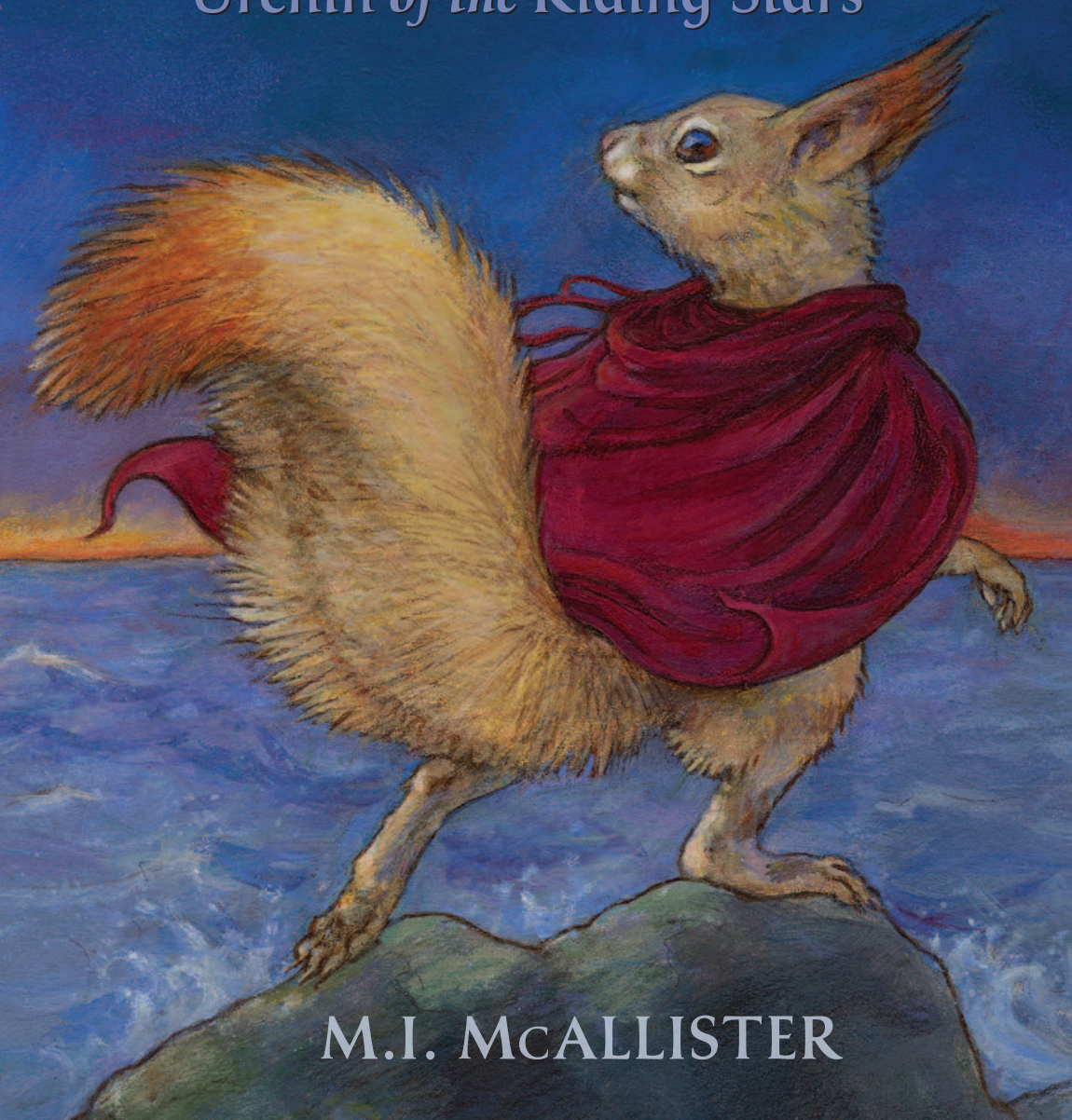


The
MISTMANTIE
CHRONICLES
BOOK ONE

Urchin of the Riding Stars



M.I. McALLISTER

The
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CHRONICLES



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Urchin of the Riding Stars

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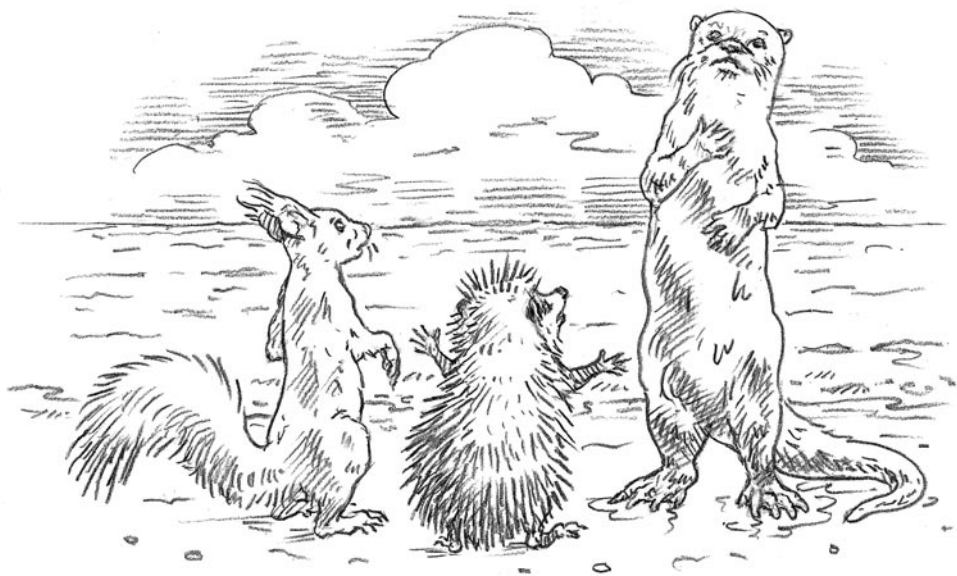
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*For Caroline Sheldon,
with thanks to Jo Boardman
for the squirrel*



THE CREATURES OF MISTMANTLE

A List Which Readers May Find Useful

THE SQUIRRELS

Brother Fir
Crispin
Urchin
Apple, Urchin's foster mother
Gleaner
Crackle
Husk
Lady Aspen
Granite
Whisper
Sepia

THE HEDGEHOGS

King Brushen
Queen Spindle
Prince Tumble
Needle, Urchin's friend
Scufflen, Needle's little brother
Thripple
Mother Huggen
Hope (Hoppen), Thripple's son

THE OTTERS

Padra
Arran
Fingal, Padra's brother
Tay

THE MOLES

Lugg
Gloss
Jig and Fig
Moth, Lugg's daughter



PROLOGUE



ON THE ISLAND OF MISTMANTLE, before dawn on an autumn morning, a squirrel lay on her side and watched the shooting stars dash across the sky. It took her mind from the pain.

It was a rare night when the stars left their orbits and swirled so low across the sky that it seemed you could reach up and touch them. These nights did not happen often, and when they did, they always meant that a great event would happen. For good, or for bad? Nobody could know which. Even old Brother Fir, watching from the highest turret in Mistmantle Tower, didn't know.

The mother squirrel didn't know, and didn't care. She lay panting, longing for help with the long, hard birth. But she was a stranger here, and knew nobody.

Her own island was far away, and she hadn't dared to stay there. A prophecy had been made about this baby: *He will bring down a*

powerful ruler. If the king had heard that, he would surely have had the baby killed, being ruthless enough to do it. She had hidden on the first trading ship she could find, and escaped.

She had hoped that the ship would go to Mistmantle. She had heard great things about the secret island, where a kind king ruled from a high tower on the rocks, and red squirrels, hedgehogs, moles, and otters lived and worked together. It was a good, safe place, protected by the enchanted mists folded around it like a cloak. Because of that protection, very few ships ever reached the island—but, at last, this one had. Already in birth pain, she had slipped from ship to shore and crawled to the shelter of the rocks.

No creature was near. Those who were awake were high on the hilltops, watching the stars. A sudden spear of pain made her lurch and gasp, but it took her breath away so completely that she could not even scream.

Birth should not be like this. Something was terribly wrong, and she was alone. Raising her head, she could see lights shining high in Mistmantle Tower; but it was far away, soaring toward the night sky.

As stars swirled over the island the squirrel's baby slithered into the world, a pale scrap of a thing with thin, downy fur, which glimmered under the starlight. With the greatest effort she had ever made in her life, the mother sat up, nuzzled him, and bit through the cord.

"Heart keep you," she whispered, and laid the warmth of her face against him. "Be happy. May someone find you and love you." Before she could give him a name, she was dead.

The baby lay on the shore, pale as moonlight, showing up clearly against the dark rocks. A gull flying overhead caught sight of something like a scrap of fish, swooped, snatched him up, and rose into the sky. Mistmantle Tower was near. That would be the place to perch and gobble down the meal.

In a dash of silver, a star rushed past; and another. The gull swerved and soared. A falling star dazzled it, and another made it veer from its course. Scared and angered, it opened its beak to screech.

The newborn squirrel fell, spinning, gaining speed. If he had hit the rocks, he would never have breathed again, but he fell into shallow water and the waves washed him onto cold, wet sand.

In Mistmantle Tower, animals had crowded around the windows all night to watch the stars. The best was over now, and they were smothering their yawns with paws and settling into their nests for a brief sleep. But in the highest turret of all, Brother Fir remained watching, leaning his paws on the sill to ease his lame leg. The squirrel priest was old, but his eyes were still sharp, and he missed nothing. When he saw something white tumble from the sky, he leaned out to see better. Sometimes fragments of rock would fall to earth as the stars passed, and it could be one of those.

Below, from another window, Crispin stretched forward and turned his face to the sky. He was a young squirrel living in the tower, an attendant to the hedgehog King Brushen. Though he was young, he had just been made a member of the Circle, the small group of animals closest to the king. He craned his neck from the window.

When he, too, saw something white spin down through the air, he leaped from the window and ran swiftly down the wall to the shore.

In the dim, early light, Crispin knelt by the thing at the water's edge. He had expected something hard and bright, like a precious stone, but what he'd found was a curled-up scrap that could be anything. A starfish?

It moved. As Crispin watched it gave a thin cry, uncurled, and waved a tiny paw in the air. He heard the shuffling step of Brother Fir behind him but was too fascinated to look around.

"It's a baby!" he said.

"Well, Heart bless it, so it is!" said Fir. "Pick it up, young Crispin, don't leave it there!"

Crispin wasn't used to babies. He scooped it up awkwardly in two paws, afraid of hurting it, but it stretched and wriggled; and without thinking, he cradled it against the warmth of his shoulder. Brother Fir took off the old gray cloak he wore.

"You young squirrels don't feel the cold," he said. "You're always going out without your cloaks. Wrap him in that before he freezes."

"How did he get here?" wondered Crispin aloud, watching the baby's face as he wrapped the cloak around it. "He must be very new."

"A few hours old, I think," said Fir. "And most unusual. Look at that fur!"

Crispin didn't know what newborn babies were supposed to look like, but he knew there was something strange about this one. It was paler than the sand.

“We need to find his mother,” he said. “She must be worried.”

“She must be dead,” said Fir bluntly. “Or dying, or she’s rejected it. A mother separated from her baby would be screaming to split the rocks. She’d have the whole island out looking for him.”

Crispin handed the baby to Fir, ran around the shore to find a group of otters, and sent them to search for the baby’s mother. He returned to find a chubby female squirrel bounding rather heavily down the beach, and even from a distance he could hear her calling to Fir.

“What you found?” she bellowed. “A one of them stars?”

Crispin flinched. Apple was a warmhearted squirrel, but not very bright and extremely talkative.

“Morning, Brother Fir, sir—Oh! Morning, Crispin, I’ve come looking for stars—I mean, bits of stars—I been up a tree all night to watch them stars. Don’t know what bits of stars look like when they’re on the beach, but I come looking, all the same. You found one?”

“Better than a star,” said Fir. He lifted back a corner of the cloak, and the baby blinked sleepily.

“A baby!” Apple’s deep brown eyes widened. “Ooh! Can I have a little hold?”

Crispin thought this might not be a good idea, but Fir handed her the baby. She made little comforting noises to it as it nestled into her fur.

“Whose is he?” she asked.

“He’s lost,” said Fir. “He was washed up by the sea. We’re looking for his mother.”

“If you can’t find her, I’ll have him,” she said promptly. “I don’t mind. I’ll take care of him. I love babies, me.”

“Thank you, Apple,” said Fir as he took the baby back. “We’ll take him to my turret, to warm him by the fire. Will you find a nursing mother who can feed him, in case his own can’t be found?”

“I’ll look after him,” called Apple over her shoulder as she hopped away.

“Don’t let her near him!” said Crispin. “She doesn’t know her teeth from her tail tip. She’d forget where she’d left him.”

“She’s a motherly soul,” said Fir. “And she wouldn’t bring him up alone—there’s a whole colony of squirrels in Anemone Wood, all bringing each other up. They’re capable of raising one extra youngling between them. They cope well enough with their own. You seem to have survived.”

They began the long climb back to the tower. Crispin would rather have skimmed up the walls, but he slowed down to keep pace with Fir.

“You told her he was washed up by the sea,” he said.

“Hm. I certainly did,” said Fir. “He must be an orphan, and not from here. We’ve never had a squirrel that color before. That makes him different enough from the other squirrels, without them thinking he came tumbling down out of the sky on a night of riding stars. And if I know Apple, she’ll soon forget that we had anything to do with him. Let her think she found him herself. We’ll tell him all he needs to know when the time is right.”

They stopped by a window so that Fir could ease his lame leg and get his breath back, and Crispin looked down at the tideline. It was scattered with all sizes of shells, colored pebbles, driftwood, shining clusters of seaweed, tattered feathers, and the spiny shells of sea urchins.

“Urchin,” he said. “Can we call him Urchin? He was found on the shore.”

Fir raised a paw. “May the Heart bless you and keep you, Urchin of Mistmantle,” he said.

And far away on the other side of the island, a wave of the sea lifted Urchin’s mother, cradled her, and carried her gently away.



CHAPTER ONE



FROM THE HIGHEST POINT OF WATCHTOP HILL, Urchin could see the whole island.

For days, squirrels and hedgehogs had dragged rough branches up this hill. The wood for their bonfire was ready to light now, stacked up so high that Urchin knew he had to climb it. He was old enough to manage it, and young enough to want to. Springing swiftly from one branch to the next, twirling his tail to balance himself, he reached the very top, gripped with his hind claws, and dusted moss from his fur. He was still as pale as honey, with the red squirrel color only at the tips of his ears and tail. When he straightened up, shook his ears, and looked out over Mistmantle, he felt he was lord of the island.

Tonight would be a night of riding stars. The animals would gather here as the air turned cool, light the bonfire, watch the stars swirl and dance through the darkening sky, and guess at what great things would happen next.

Anemone Wood spread out below him to the south, with a first touch of autumn turning the leaves to crisp gold. Farther away, on the shore, otters chased each other in play. A line of small rowboats bobbed on the water. Urchin could never understand why otters were so fond of boats, when they all swam so powerfully. Maybe they just liked anything to do with water.

A tall ship was moored by the jetty, with its sails furled and its painted figurehead gleaming with color in the sunshine. A work party of squirrels and otters had been lined up to unload it, passing crate after crate along the line. Urchin guessed at what might be in those crates. Wool for cloaks, maybe; paint for the workshops—or rare wine for King Brushen's cellars? Tomorrow he would be down there, doing real, grown-up work, helping to load the ship with timber.

He didn't really want to think about tomorrow. Balancing and curling his hind claws, he turned a little farther to gaze far over the treetops to Mistmantle Tower, and his heart stretched out to it.

The tower was the place he longed for. On a high outcrop of rock, gleaming in shell pink, white, and pale, sandstone yellow that was almost gold, Mistmantle Tower rose like a statue to the sky. From a turret, a pennant fluttered in the breeze. A young female squirrel was hopping up the steps carrying something in a basket, and the moles on guard stood back to let her in. She might be one of the queen's attendants. Urchin envied her. He even envied the kitchen mole who appeared at a low window and threw dirty water into a drain. From

the king in the Throne Room to the kitchen mole in the scullery, life in the tower must be wonderful.

He had been there, of course. All the Mistmantle creatures were invited to the tower for great occasions, like the Spring Festival. Apple said that when she was little, there had been all sorts of wonderful feasts and festivals with banquets, music, and garlands. There wasn't so much of that now, but at least Urchin knew what it was like to stand in the vast Gathering Chamber of the tower.

He had been there for the naming ceremony of Prince Tumble, the only child of King Brushen and Queen Spindle. It seemed that all the island's creatures had crammed into the tower that day. Wonderful Threadings hung from the walls, stitched and woven pictures showing stories of the island; but there was neither room nor time to take a good look at them. Even following the crowd up the stairs had been confusing. Urchin had wondered how anyone ever found their way out.

The procession had been magnificent. The animals of the Circle had entered first; then there had been a gasp of admiration as the three Captains of Mistmantle stepped proudly down the hall with gold and silver glittering on their robes and circlets of gold on their heads. First Husk the Squirrel, then Crispin the Squirrel and Padra the Otter. Brother Fir had followed them, limping, in his plain white tunic. Then, at last, tall, strong, and splendid, came King Brushen, with Queen Spindle at his side and all the colors of a jewel house gleaming from their mantles, and the queen's friend, Lady Aspen

the Squirrel, with the bright-eyed wriggling baby hedgehog, Prince Tumble, in her arms. Finally, with every animal stretching up on its clawtips, Brother Fir had lifted up Prince Tumble and blessed him.

Urchin had not been back to the tower since. He looked past it, into the enchanted mists that surrounded and protected the island so well that few ships ever reached it. Islanders who belonged here, if they left by water, could never return by water. The otters took care never to row their boats beyond the mists.

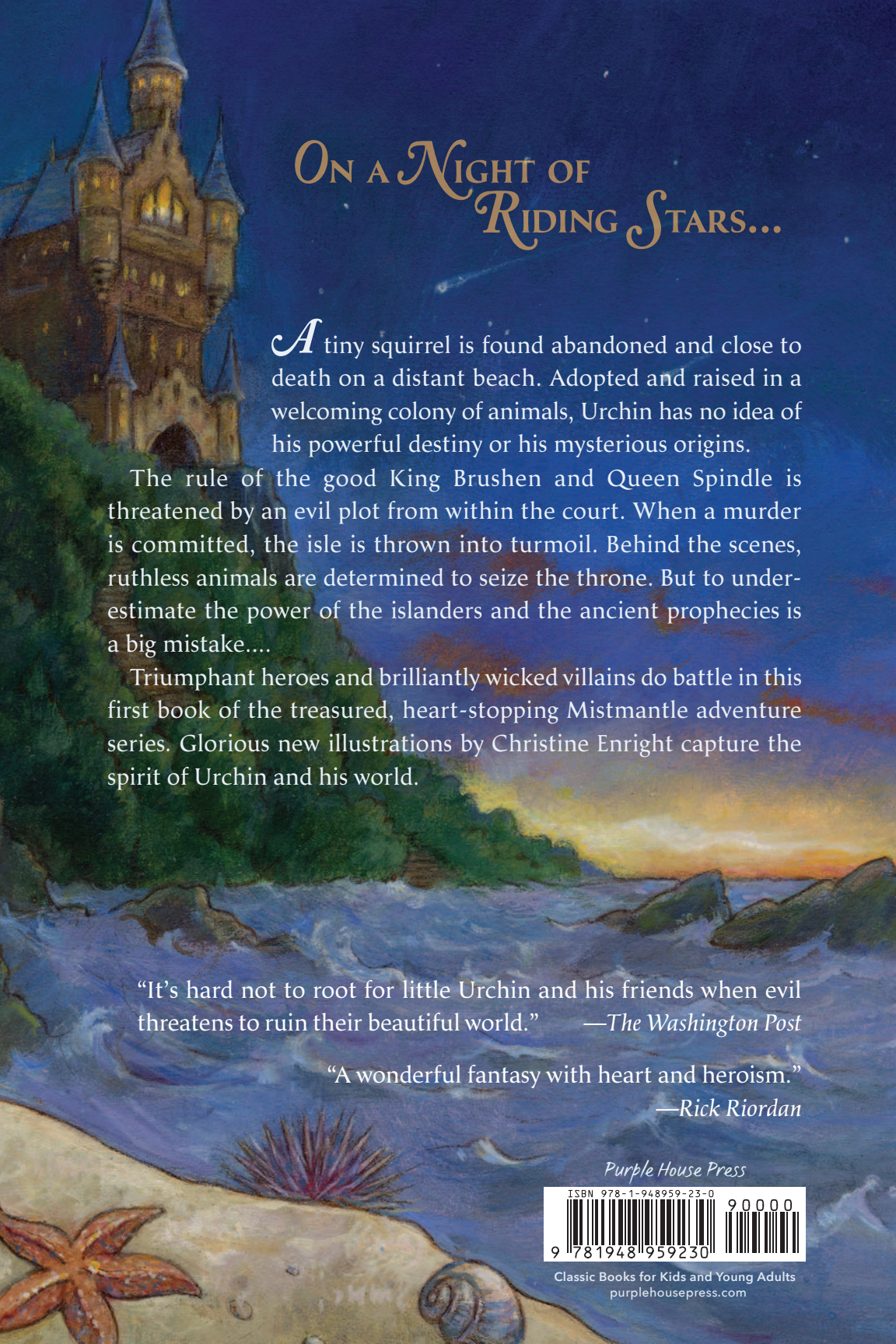
He was trying to work out how long it would be until nightfall when a fir cone hit him on the shoulder.

“He’s showing off,” said a squirrel voice.

“Ignore him,” said another.

Two other squirrels had reached the hilltop, Gleaner and Crackle. They were never apart, and always looked at Urchin as if they’d just been planning something very nasty for him. Crackle seemed to go out of her way to make trouble, but Gleaner did it without even trying.

Urchin looked past them and saw other animals working their way up the hill, the squirrels taking shortcuts as they leaped from one tree to the next. Gleaner and Crackle were followed by Urchin’s great friend, Needle, a hedgehog with unusually sharp prickles, and around her—not too close—was a scampering, clambering bunch of very young squirrels, barely old enough to get up to Watchtop at all without being carried. Beyond them Urchin’s foster mother, Apple, lumbered up the hill, keeping mostly to the path. When she did jump on a branch, it bent alarmingly.



ON A NIGHT OF RIDING STARS...

A tiny squirrel is found abandoned and close to death on a distant beach. Adopted and raised in a welcoming colony of animals, Urchin has no idea of his powerful destiny or his mysterious origins.

The rule of the good King Brushen and Queen Spindle is threatened by an evil plot from within the court. When a murder is committed, the isle is thrown into turmoil. Behind the scenes, ruthless animals are determined to seize the throne. But to underestimate the power of the islanders and the ancient prophecies is a big mistake....

Triumphant heroes and brilliantly wicked villains do battle in this first book of the treasured, heart-stopping Mistmantle adventure series. Glorious new illustrations by Christine Enright capture the spirit of Urchin and his world.

"It's hard not to root for little Urchin and his friends when evil threatens to ruin their beautiful world." —*The Washington Post*

"A wonderful fantasy with heart and heroism." —*Rick Riordan*

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