



The
MISTMANTLE
CHRONICLES
BOOK FIVE

Urchin and the Rage Tide

M.I. McALLISTER

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Urchin and the Rage Tide

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*For Becky, Adrienne, and all the young people
they have brought to Mistmantle*

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After many years of peace and prosperity on the island of Mistmantle, tidal waves suddenly threaten. Urchin must help the imperiled citizens to safety while trying to stop a reckless and dangerous squirrel's rise to power.

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WHO'S WHO AND WHO'S WHAT

You don't have to remember all the names. They're here in case you forget who's a mole and who's an otter! New friends are marked with an asterisk.



THE SQUIRRELS

Urchin
Sepia
King Crispin
Queen Cedar
Princess Catkin
Prince Oakleaf
Princess Almondflower
Juniper
Scatter
Apple
Filbert
*Mossberry
Whittle
Russet
Heath
*Cherry
*Twirl
Crackle
*Grain
*Curtail (Swan Isle)

THE OTTERS

Padra
Arran
Fingal
Swanfeather
Tide
Fionn
Tay

THE HEDGEHOGS

Needle
Hope
Docken
Thripple
Mother Huggen
Scufflen
Myrtle
Mopple
*Pottle
*Furtle
*Spirtle (known as Ouch)
*Ruffle
*Morrow (Whitewings)
Queen Larch (Whitewings)

THE MOLES

Tipp
Todd
Spade
Moth

THE SWANS

Lord Crown (Swan Isle)

PREFACE

The story that began with Crispin as a young tower squirrel and Urchin as a baby had come to a natural end. Crispin, working, fighting, loving and praying his way through his reign, had made the island secure and happy. Urchin was full grown and ready to step up to his role as a Captain of Mistmantle. The island had a new significant young animal, Corr the Voyager, serving Urchin as Urchin had once served Padra. It was time to leave them.

I had known for a long time what waited for my characters at the end of the story, but I had to work out how to get them there. The island had to face its greatest challenge. There were scenes in this book that were hard to write, and more than once I had to stop and apologize to my dearly loved animals, but at the end, everything came together as it should. As so often happens, the threat came from two different directions, one danger from outside the island and another from within.

Mossberry uses deceitful and dishonest ways to turn vulnerable animals to himself. He doesn't want what's best for them. He wants to be obeyed and adored. Sadly there will also be those who follow someone like Mossberry, and believe me, it never ends well. Look out for the Mossberrys!

I miss writing for my characters, and it was always fun to find scenes for Fingal, Hope, and Apple, among others. But it ends in Love. What else could it do?

Heart keep you, Margaret

2023





PROLOGUE

FOLLOWING THE RAVEN WAR, there were years of peace and plenty on Mistmantle. Summers were bright, and harvests so lavish that there was never a hungry winter. The sun sparkled from waters teeming with fish. It was the most wonderful time for young animals to grow up.

Urchin, Needle, Sepia, and Fingal were loved and honored throughout the island, and were like older brothers and sisters to Princess Catkin, Prince Oakleaf, and little Princess Almondflower. Juniper had become a wise and gentle priest. In those years, King Crispin the squirrel—Crispin Swanrider—continually toured the island, meeting animals in the woods and bays where they lived. It was as if he could never have enough of the island and its good company. Corr the young otter continued to train as Urchin's page.

As ever, the young learned the stories of their island. Enchanted mists protected Mistmantle, and few creatures found a way through them. No animal who truly belonged to the island could leave by water and return by water, and no animal had ever left the island in any way three times, and returned.

Rarely, only once in very many generations, there was a Voyager, an animal who could come and go through the mists at will. Some animals thought that Mistmantle would never again have a Voyager. But others—King Crispin and Queen Cedar, Urchin, Padra and Juniper—knew that there already was one.

Animals had their hopes, dreams, and secrets. King Crispin had a secret that nobody guessed. Corr dreamed of a bright, exciting future full of adventure. And a squirrel called Mossberry had strange dreams of power.

If Mossberry's dreams had stayed in his head, he might have done no harm. But already, his earnest speeches, his bright eyes, and the power of his personality were attractive to a few animals who believed whatever he told them.

Mossberry's dreams put all the island in danger.



CHAPTER ONE

NOW THE DAY BREAKS through the night! Here is the year's turning! Lift your hearts to the Heart! Greet the light!"

From an open window of the Gathering Chamber of Mistmantle Tower, Juniper the priest called out the ancient words. A cheer rang out from all the squirrels, moles, hedgehogs and otters crammed into the tower, and the animals on the rocks below the window applauded, cheered, and hugged each other as the first streaks of morning light spread across the sky. In the highest turret of Mistmantle Tower, Hope the hedgehog and Scatter the squirrel lit a candle, set it in the window, and hugged each other for joy. Soon, candlelight glowed from every window in the tower. Everywhere there were ribboned garlands, holly and evergreens.

This was a joyous time of winter. After the longest and darkest night of the year, the animals would gather to watch for the sunrise.

It marked the year's turning, and though there was still more winter to come, they knew that from this night on, the days would grow longer and the nights shorter. For days now there would be parties, feasts, entertainments, and gift giving, to help them face the cold days ahead.

Juniper breathed in the dry cold with its taste of frost. As lanterns were lit on the rocks, he saw the soft sparkle of frost beneath them.

"It's...so...so...so like something in a story!" gasped Princess Catkin as she came to stand beside him. Her eyes were large and bright, and her whiskers and ears twitched with excitement. "Shall we go down?"

King Crispin and Queen Cedar were behind them. The king put his paws on Catkin's shoulders.

"I'll come with you, sweetheart," he said, and soon bright-eyed mole maids were wriggling busily through the crowd, craning their necks to see over the heaps of soft white mantles they brought for any animals who wanted to go outside and greet the dawn. Young Prince Oakleaf took as many mantles as his paws would hold and threw them out of the window.

"Urchin!" called the king, as with a flourish of his tail he sprang to perch on the windowsill, "are you coming?"

Through the crowd came a squirrel whose fur was pale as golden honey and whose only deep squirrel red was on his ears and tail-tip. On his wrist, he wore a bracelet of faded squirrel hair.

"I'll follow you, Your Majesty!" called Urchin. With a swishing of

red-gold tails, the whole royal family ran down the walls and began putting on the cloaks which lay in a soft and tumbled heap on the rocks. Urchin followed them, and, reaching the ground, helped Princess Almondflower with a cloak so big for her that he had to find a mole maid to carry her train.

Juniper, who had a lame leg, found running down the walls difficult, and, besides, it wouldn't be suitable for a priest who had just led an important ceremony. He came down the stairs and joined the others on the rocks, where all animal faces were turned hopefully to the eastern sky. They stood in little groups, holding up lanterns where the flames leaned and flickered in the draft. The pools of light made the frost glimmer with gold.

The otters stood nearest to the shore, the youngest twisting in and out of the shallows. Padra and Arran, both wearing captains' swords and circlets, stood shoulder to shoulder and paw in paw. Their daughter Swanfeather danced in and out of the waves while their son, Tide, kept an eye on his little sister, Fionn, who had found a frog and was watching it with fascination. Padra's brother, Fingal, was pushing out his boat, the *Captain Lugg*, which was fully loaded with excited, squeaking little hedgehogs.

"One quick trip around the bay," Fingal was saying. "Look out for starfish!"

Moles peeped up from tunnels, peered short-sightedly at the sky, grunted a greeting to any animal who was near, and went back to bed. But Tipp and Todd, the grandsons of Captain Lugg, stayed with

their friends on the beach, watching the sunrise. Their friend Spade, who was a Circle mole, joined them.

“Daft idea, staying up all night,” he remarked, rubbing his paws together for warmth. “But I suppose you have to make the effort,” and they knew he was enjoying it as much as they were.

Urchin followed King Crispin and his family to the jetty where the waves shushed softly against the staithes. His old friend Needle the hedgehog—one of the sharpest and most skillful hedgehogs on the island—was bustling about giving orders to the pages.

“It’s time to serve the spiced wine,” she was saying, “and hot berry cordial for the little ones. And someone—yes, you, please, Pepper—go to Miss Sepia and tell her we’re ready for the choir.”

The choir were already gathering, holding out paws to help each other clamber to a high point on the rocks and giggling if they slithered or fell. Their white robes, gathered up in their paws as they climbed, gleamed clearly against the night sky and in the poor light and the confusion of white robes Urchin couldn’t even see Sepia of the Songs, but everyone would recognize her voice when she sang.

“Urchin!” called a loud female voice. “My Urchin!”

It was Apple, his foster mother. He turned, smiling, to see her pressing through the crowd with such determination in her elbows that animals fell away before her. She wore a new embroidered cloak that Needle had made for her, but her hat was the same as ever, and as she drew near, Urchin saw that it was decorated for winter with holly leaves. No wonder her passage through the crowd had been so

easy. She carried a lantern in one paw and was carefully adjusting her hat with the other.

“A happy dawn, Urchin, ooh, what a lovely dawn, too, what a night, all frosty, mind you don’t slip,” she said, and paused to take a few deep breaths before she could go on. “My Filbert’s just getting me a spiced wine, they do a lovely spiced wine in them kitchens, I just come to wish you a happy dawn, now, off you go, you should be with the king, or guarding something, or whatever Circle things you’re meant to be doing, you go and do your Circley things, my Urchin.”

Urchin hugged her, (keeping a watchful eye on the holly,) and did as she said. Juniper and the king’s family were now all on the jetty, watching as the sky slowly grew lighter. Princess Almondflower splashed her paws in the water, gasping and giggling with the cold. Urchin’s page, Corr, appeared from somewhere with a silver jug and cups on a tray, and Princess Catkin grinned at him and helped him pour the wine. She and Corr were old friends.

“Corr,” said King Crispin, “Urchin tells me you’ve completed your training.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Corr, bowing as he presented the king’s cup.

“And that you’ve done well,” said the king.

“Yes, he has, Your Majesty,” put in Urchin, seeing that Corr didn’t know how to answer.

“Then I’ll have to speak to him,” said Crispin, with a swift smile past Corr at Urchin. “See what we’re going to do with you next.”