

The
MISTMANTIE
CHRONICLES
BOOK FOUR

Urchin and the Raven War

M.I. McALLISTER

The
MISTMANTIE
CHRONICLES
BOOK FOUR

Urchin and the Raven War



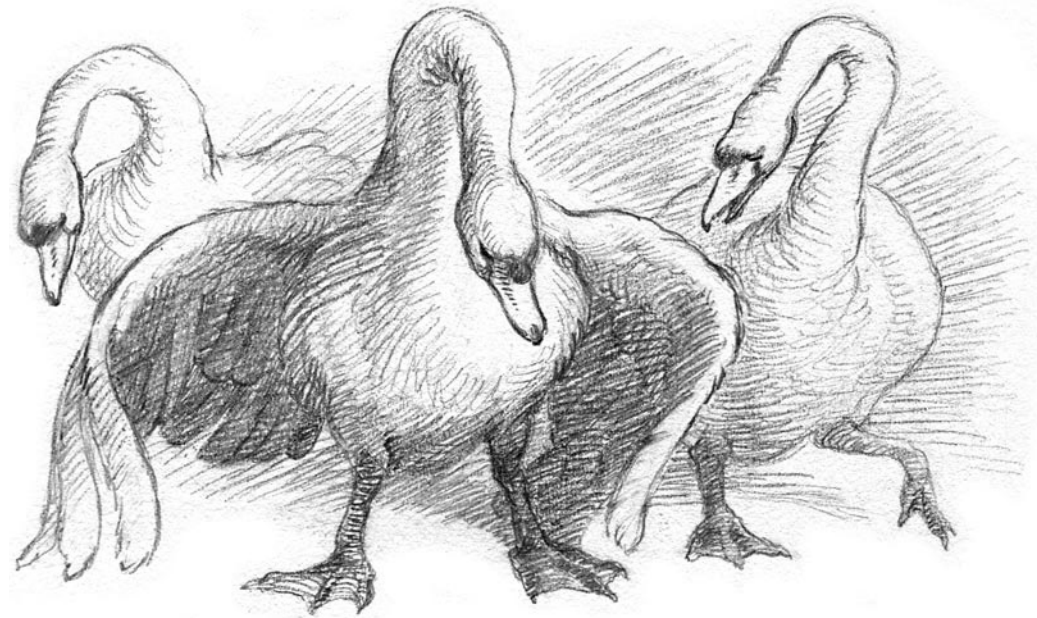
by
M.I. McAllister

cover by
Christine Enright

illustrations by
Janna Mattia

Purple House Press
Cynthiana, Kentucky

For the Northumbrian saints, past, present, and to come



Published by
Purple House Press
PO Box 787
Cynthiana, Kentucky 41031

Classic Books for Kids and Young Adults
purplehousepress.com

Text copyright © 2008 by M.I. McAllister
Illustrations copyright © 2023 by Purple House Press
All rights reserved

When the swans of Swan Isle are attacked by vicious ravens, Urchin the squirrel
and the inhabitants of Mistmantle rush to their aid.

ISBN 9781948959261

NEW CHARACTERS OF MISTMANTLE

Since you were last here, Princess Catkin has done a lot of growing up. Here are Mistmantle's newcomers in case you have trouble knowing your morrels from your otterhogs.

THE SQUIRRELS

Filbert
Pitter
Prince Oakleaf
Princess Almondflower

THE HEDGEHOGS

Brindle
Myrtle

THE OTTERS

Corr
Kerrera

THE MOLES

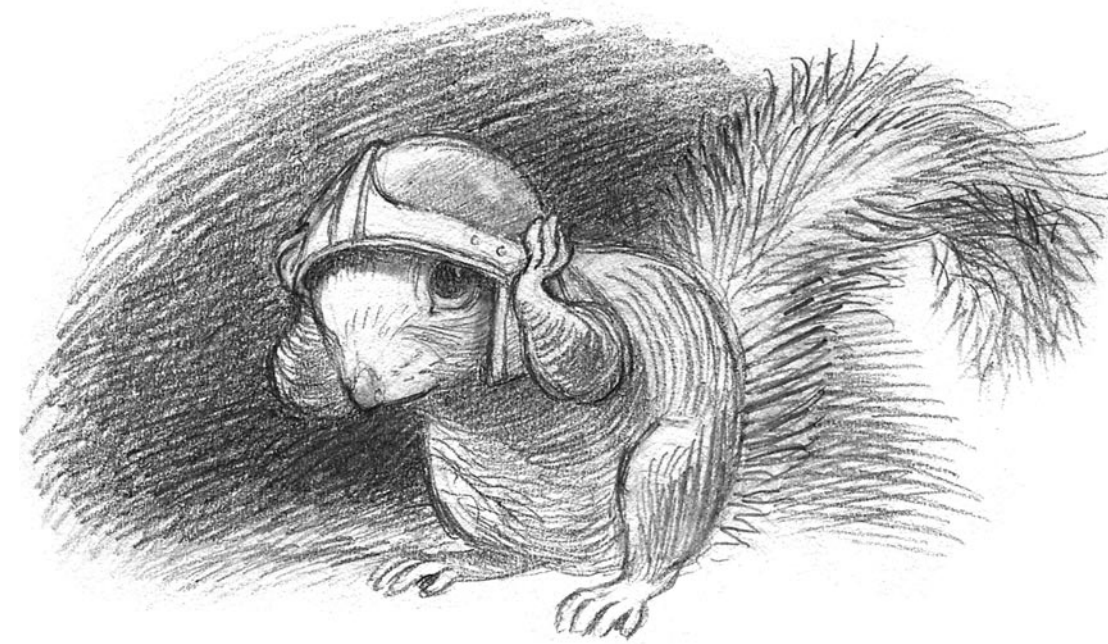
Grith
Swish

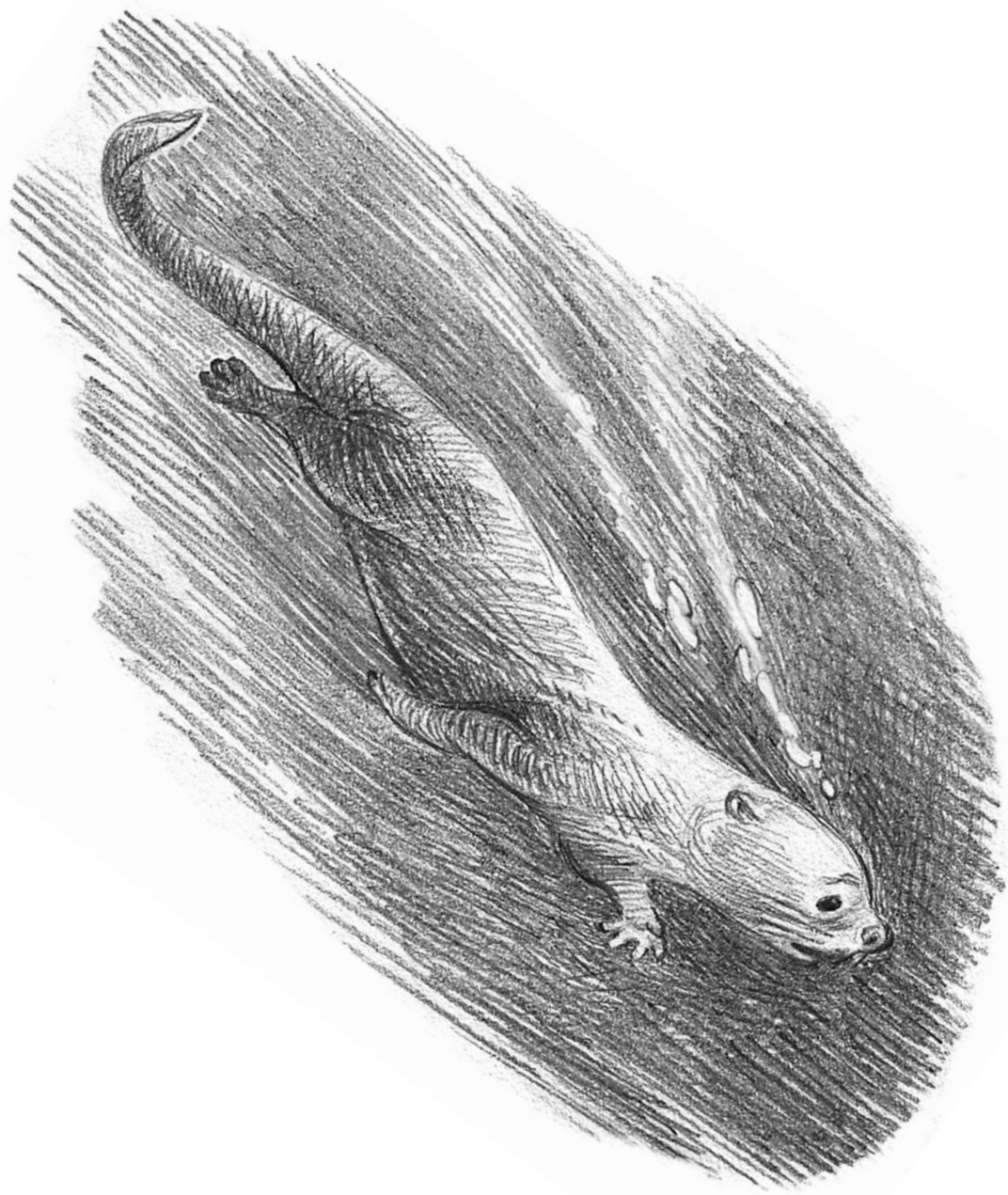
THE SWANS

Lady Arcneck
Lord Arcneck
Prince Crown
(You met them long ago)

THE RAVENS

The Archraven
The Silver Prince
The Taloness





PREFACE

Every author sitting down to write a new book has to ask, “What’s the problem?” A book needs to have a struggle—an enemy to be defeated, a puzzle to be solved, a danger to be faced. With *Urchin and the Raven War*, I wanted the islanders to face the fiercest and most merciless enemy yet. The obvious thing would be birds, because they could fly over the mists, and they would have to be big, ruthless birds. Ravens were ideal. I gave them no redeeming features at all.

The Ravens had to have a reason to attack Mistmantle, so that’s what I gave them. To make it more exciting, I gave them their own legend, too, about the Silver Prince. With all those pieces in place, there was room to set things in motion for the next book. The seeds for *Urchin and the Rage Tide* are here.

I was also aware that Urchin was growing up. We needed a younger hero, so Corr arrived and his calling was outlined, even though he doesn’t know it yet. You’ll see a lot more of him.

Heart keep you, Margaret

2023



PROLOGUE

CORR WAS TIRED OF WAITING. He needed to do something new.

Corr was one of a large clan of otters living beyond the Rough Rocks on a far tip of Mistmantle. He had so many brothers, sisters, cousins, half-cousins and sort-of-cousins that the adults were always counting them in case any of them got lost and nobody noticed. They taught each other to swim, fish, row, and sail, make boats and nets and repair them, and all the other skills an otter needed to get along “well enough.” That was what everyone said, time and again. “We get along well enough.”

Corr was young, and didn’t want to get on well enough. His head and heart were full of dreams, stories and questions, and he wanted excitement. What he yearned for was to see the world, but that was no good, living on Mistmantle. Enchanted mists circled the island, making it impossible for anyone who truly belonged there to leave

by water and return by water, so unless he learned to fly—unlikely, for an otter—he could never leave. But if he couldn’t explore the world, couldn’t he at least explore the island?

On long summer evenings he would sit with his Great-aunt Kerrera outside the smokehouse, and she would tell him of the terrible times of Lord Husk, when weak and disabled babies had been put to death, and little Prince Tumble had been murdered. On winter nights when even the starlight was bitter with cold, they would settle by the fire and, in a haze of fishy-smelling smoke, she would tell him of the wonderful Spring Festival when King Crispin (but he had been Captain Crispin in those days) had flown home to Mistmantle on a swan and saved all the island. When snow fell, she would tell him of the night when Urchin of the Riding Stars, Juniper the priest, and Captain Lugg the mole had sailed home through snow and riding stars, and the mists had let them through, bringing Cedar of Whitewings, who had married King Crispin. He loved that story, partly because it had a night of riding stars in it, when the stars flew from their orbits and swooped about the island. Nights like that always signaled a great event, for good or for harm. But he liked it, too, because it was about sailing through the mists, and the thought of that thrilled and frightened him.

In all these stories Brother Fir had been there with his wise, kind eyes, his limp, his way of saying “Hm!” and his friendliness to all animals, from the king and queen to every young hedgehog, otter, mole, and squirrel. Corr had seen him from a distance and knew the priest had been at his naming ceremony, but he couldn’t remember

it. With all his heart, he wanted that kind, wise smile turned to him.

I want him to know about me, he thought. Even if there isn’t much to know.

He had heard breathtaking tales of King Crispin and Queen Cedar at Mistmantle Tower, and of their captains and the Circle, the animals closest to the king, who helped and advised them. Corr wanted to meet Captain Padra, and his brother, Fingal of the Floods. They were otters, like himself. He dreamed of meeting his hero, Urchin of the Riding Stars, the pale squirrel who had crossed the sea and returned again.

There were stories, too, of the distant past, and Voyagers. There had been very few Voyagers in the history of the island. A Voyager—usually an otter—could travel freely through the mists and back, and visit islands beyond the sea.

He’d never meet a real Voyager. But he might meet Brother Fir. One day, he would go to the tower and meet them all. One day, he would have the adventures he could only imagine as he carried baskets of herring up the hill to the smokehouse, and mended nets. But each day was filled with fishing, repairing, and tramping up and down the hill to the smokehouse.

The warm, dark smokehouse, where Great-aunt Kerrera cooked fish over woodsmoke to preserve it, was on a hill with the fumes of oak, peat, and fish hanging around it. Great-aunt Kerrera was always good for a cordial, a biscuit, and a story of old times, and occasionally, Filbert would be there, too.

Filbert was a stout and solid squirrel who seemed old to Corr but

probably wasn't really. He was too shy to mix with the otters on the shore, but he liked to help Great-aunt Kerrera in the smokehouse where he, too, was rewarded with a cordial and a biscuit. When he could be persuaded to talk at all, he sometimes talked of Mistmantle Tower.

On this particular spring day, when Corr had carried so many baskets of fish to and from the smokehouse that he smelled of singed oak and never wanted to look at a kipper again in his life, Filbert was there. They sat outside in the sunshine, drinking cordials that tasted smoky.

"Can you tell me anything else about the tower, Filbert?" asked Corr.

Filbert was silent for a while, looking into the cordial. He always did that.

"I was there when we all had to give our clawmarks and Crispin was sent away," he said at last, shaking his head at the cup. "Bad, that. Bad. Bad days. I remember old King Brushen, crouched over on his throne."

Corr had heard that story before, and wanted something new. "Did you ever do anything really exciting?" he asked.

"Me?" Filbert made a little grunt that was probably meant to be a laugh and continued talking into his cordial. "Would have liked to. No time for adventures, though. When I was young, I was like you, fetching and carrying. Might have liked an adventure. Never got round to it, really." There was a long silence and Corr thought he

had finished, when Filbert added, "I hear Brother Fir hasn't got long. Must be very old. Getting frail."

"Corr!" shouted Great-aunt Kerrera. "I've got some nice big fish bones and oil here. Take them to your ma, they'll come in for mending."

That evening Corr trudged downhill with his paws full of fish, fish bones, and oil for waterproofing and his head full of Brother Fir, who was old and dying. How many other animals would grow old and die before he had the chance to meet them?

One day, he thought, I could be like Filbert. I could grow old, and look back wishing I'd done more with my life. It's no good waiting for a chance to get away. I have to make my own chance, and do it now.

At home, he found a boat so old and shabby that nobody else wanted it. He patched it up with sap and seasoned bark and put in fresh water, food, and a cloak. Then he found his parents, who were struggling to put his brothers, sister, and a few cousins to bed. When he told them he was going to the tower to see Brother Fir before he died, his mother said that Brother Fir was a lovely old soul, bless him, give him our love, take a warm cloak, take care, and don't be too long. After he had gone, she winked knowingly at his father and said that Corr would be back when he was hungry.

At sunrise, Corr the otter took to the water. What he hadn't told anyone was that he wasn't going *straight* to the tower. There was exploring to do first, and adventures to be found. He couldn't go to the tower without any stories to tell.