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BEASTHEADS

Mike Reeves-McMillan

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Other books in this series:

- [*Realmgolds*](#)
- [*Hope and the Clever Man*](#)
- [*Hope and the Patient Man*](#)

Dedicated to the many colleagues over the years who've taught me what professionalism looks like.

CHAPTER ONE

Berry

Berry stood with the other members of her age cohort in the muddy field Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) near the sacred whitebark grove, scratching at her garland where it tickled her ear. It helped distract her from how she felt in her gut, which reminded her of when she'd climbed the big oak tree and looked down, down to the grass below. Sort of a floating feeling, but uncomfortable.

"All right, listen now," said Sunrise, the clan head's daughter and heir. "You young ones will have your ceremony first, and then the betweeners who are having their adulthood rites. I want you all to stay quiet, listen to my father and be respectful. Right?"

Berry nodded along with Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) the others, and at Sunrise's chivvyng they formed into a line behind Meadowflower, the oldest. It would have Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) been nicer if it could have been in the warmer weather, because the mud was cold between Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) Berry's bare toes, but the rule was that the ceremony was held at whichever seasonal rite came next, after enough girls in the cohort got their bleeding. So Beastheads (The Gryphon

Clerks Book 0) here they were, on the cusp of Late Harvest and Early Fallow, shivering in the mud while the clouds over the Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) Dragonpeaks threatened rain.

They walked in age order, and that put Berry near the front of the group. She'd already had her eleventh birthday, and was closer to her twelfth.

Out the other side of the grove, she glimpsed the betweeners waiting for their ceremony. Her brother Hill was one of them, seventeen now, and about to be declared an adult. Their oldest siblings had already found oathmates and started homes of their own. Berry was the second youngest of seven living, out of a total of ten, so she was used to being part of a crowd, not standing out particularly. She wasn't the oldest or the youngest, the biggest or the smallest, the fastest or the slowest. Even her name was shared by at least sixteen other people of all ages in the little clan.

The clan head stood in the sacred grove, with his back to the mother-tree from which Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) the other whitebarks had seeded. As they neared, he adjusted his own garland of evergreens and rubbed his hands on his trousers. It comforted Berry to see that she wasn't the only nervous one.

The line became a curve, with Meadowflower now at the clan head's left hand, and the clan head began to speak.

He had a boring voice, and Berry stopped listening after a bit. She was aware of her cousin Rock fidgeting Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) next to her (he always had trouble being still; her uncle and aunt had named him in hope that this would change, but so far it hadn't), and of the birdsong, and the gentle wind in the currently leafless branches of the grove, and she fell into a kind of wordless daydream waiting for the ceremony to be over.

Finally, the clan head declared them all to have passed from childhood to the status of betweeners, and they circled the mother-tree and passed Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) through an arch of Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) branches held by a betweener boy and girl from the previous year's cohort, and cast their garlands into a basket. Berry was allowed to take her hair out of its braids now, and the boys' hair would be cut, and Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) some of the cohort would get apprenticeships, though not Berry. She would go on helping her parents look after the sheep, Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) just as always. That didn't count as a real apprenticeship.

Several of the girls were unbraiding each other's hair. Berry didn't have any particular friends to do that for her, so she did it herself. She tried to ignore the pricking at her Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) eyes, the feeling of exclusion as she saw two girls helping popular Meadowflower.

She waited nearby, with some others Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) from the cohort who had brothers or sisters going through adulthood rites, for Hill to come out of the grove. He would be allowed to grow his beard out now, and the girls — young Beastheads (The Gryphon

Clerks Book 0) women, as of moments ago — were already helping each other with their adult-pattern hairstyles. Hill snuck glances at them, particularly at Pool, who lived round the back of Craggy Hill and who he'd been sweet on for years.

"You can court her, now," said Berry.

"Ah, her family won't allow it," said Hill, putting his arm around his little sister. "They're too rich for the likes of us." Pool's family owned a donkey, and their hut had a wooden floor. "Come on, little Berry, we've got a feast to attend."

"Not as little now," said Berry, and Hill laughed and squeezed her shoulder.

The feast was set up in what approximated a village square, though "village" was an overly grand term for three houses close together. One of the three belonged to the clan head, though, and it was where the markets were held on fourth Fourdays, so if there was a general celebration this was the venue.

Because of Hill and Berry, their father had contributed a sheep, and it turned on a spit over the firepit as the rest of the family congratulated the two on their transitions.

Berry stepped back from her mother's hug and felt eyes on her from behind. She turned, and saw an elderly woman wrapped in a single Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) piece of undyed cloth — a shaman — looking straight Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) at her.

The old woman stepped up to Berry and said, "You're the one I'm Beastheads (The Gryphon Clerks Book 0) looking for."

While Berry was wondering what she meant, the spear-straight, white-haired shaman turned to Berry's parents and introduced herself as Birdwing Fox Pine. Berry didn't know much about shamans, though she knew that one with a beast name and a plant name was more important. When you were in trouble, a shaman tended to show up and do something inexplicable, then they went away again.

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