

The marking

Troy sat restlessly in the old shop. He was tired of hearing the constant clanging of the blacksmith making a sword next door. Troy's feet hurt from standing at the register, but he smiled at the stranger-woman who approached the counter. She held up her hand in greeting, showing him the Mark on her palm. Her Mark identified her as miserly, as did the meager selection of goods in her basket. Troy hurried to calculate her bill, careful not to make a mistake.

Then, when she wasn't looking, he dropped an extra handful of fresh herbs into her basket.

His older sister, Cybil, came up behind him as the customer left. "You can't be giving away the merchandise," she warned.

Troy blushed. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Cybil just clucked her tongue and went back to checking the inventory. She was always so sure of herself. Troy was her opposite: clumsy, while she was graceful; slow, while she was quick; distracted, while she was sharp. He would never measure up. And tomorrow, when he received his own Mark, everyone would be able to see that he was a failure.

A dusty woman limped into the store, carrying a baby.

They'd probably walked a long way from the desert district. The baby cried, and Troy hurried to scoop some water for them. He

winked at the baby. The mother smiled, and the baby giggled. Cybil came out from the back to check on the disturbance. Troy returned to the register before she could scold him.

He remembered Cybil's Marking Day. Confident as ever, Cybil had foretold her own Mark. She was, of course, pleased with the magnificent sharp-eyed eagle that she received, tattooed permanently on her palm.

Troy had just come of age, and he was dreading his own Marking. Up to now, he had always felt that he could change who he was, maybe become more like Cybil. But he feared that now his Mark would brand him as a loser. Marks told members of Lyra what they are capable of and what they will do in life if they choose to do so. Troy was surprised that Cybil had chosen to stay at his mother's shop. She could do so much more yet she still stayed with the old hag.

The bell on the door jangled. Papa Shaw, the village carpenter, came in with a big smile. Troy hoped that Shaw's visit was a good sign. The carpenter's hand bore the best Mark, in Troy's opinion—a black dragon with a red flame. Troy gathered his courage. "Papa Shaw," he said, "your Mark is so strong. How can I make sure I get a good Mark like yours?"

Shaw just laughed and patted Troy's shoulder. "Your Mark is already determined," Shaw said. "There's nothing you can do, so don't worry. You heard about the girl who tried to choose her

Mark?"

"You recently received a beautiful Mark yourself, am I right, young Leo?" asked Shaw. Leo held up his palm, showing his lion Mark. Troy suppressed a sigh. The lion— strong, brave—was almost too perfect a Mark for Leo.

When Shaw left, Troy asked Leo, "How can I get a good Mark?" Like Shaw, Leo laughed. But then he looked at Troy seriously. "You'll get the right Mark for you.

Everyone does," he said. Leo leaned in close. "But . . . if you really want a specific Mark, you must picture it as you place your hand in the mouth of the Marker. The machine uses what's in your mind, so just hold on to that picture in your mind. "

Troy shook his head, so Shaw launched into the tale of a girl's ill-fated attempt at Mark-fixing: she ended up being Marked for life as a cheater. Shaw was still talking when Troy's friend Leo stopped by. Shaw waved him in and explained their conversation.

Troy pondered. For Leo's idea to work, he needed to have a clear image in mind. But what should it be? He was still wondering as he drifted off to sleep that night.

The morning of Troy's Marking Day dawned bright. As light filled his bedroom, images floated in his mind. He saw the faces of the baby, Papa Shaw, Leo, and others he knew, all smiling and reaching out to him. But he couldn't hold all those images in his

mind. What could his Mark be?

Leo arrived, offering to walk Troy to his Marking. Cybil had to keep the store open, of course. Troy strolled down the street alongside Leo, too worried to keep up a conversation. Then he noticed something. Everyone they passed waved and nodded, telling Troy, "Don't worry. " Many of them shouted, "Greetings on your Marking Day!" Troy felt a rush of gratitude. His neighbors didn't know his Mark, but they knew him, and they were with him.

At length, they reached the great bronze gates of the marble Marking Hall. As the guard waved them through, Troy realized that his worry had melted away. When the moment for his Marking arrived, he smiled at Leo, then closed his eyes and placed his hand into the mouth of the Marker.