

CHAPTER 1



To be Remarkable is to be worthy.
To be Unremarkable is to be forgotten.

—GUILD OF THE CROWN NEWS

The wind slapped against the windows like invisible hands trying to push the automobile off the road. *Turn away, Unremarkable.*

I wished I could be as confident as the wind, but I was too nervous. A question kept bubbling up in my mind, yet every time I opened my mouth, it felt like all words had been magicked out of the air.

Still, I had to say something.

My *life* depended on it.

I swallowed. “We’re not going . . .” My throat went dry. “Th-there, are we?”

Am I . . . getting banished?

“What did you say, Lyra?” Aquaria called from behind the wheel, squinting at the mossy trees we whizzed by. I sat in the back seat, my sweaty palms tucked under my dress. Madame Aquaria was my Guild Matcher. That meant she was responsible for finding a guild for me since I was an orphan and couldn’t join my parents’ guild. She had a spotless record . . .

Except for me.

My reflection shone back in the window: my mud-brown hair was swept into a big, black bow and I was in my gray dress with its curved collar, a hand-me-down from my older sister. It was out of fashion, but it was the best I had. My tanned cheeks were dusted with freckles, and I was easily forgotten in a crowd.

Still, my eyes gave my feelings away. Scrunched at the corners. All my worries pinched together. I usually loved secrets because it meant I knew something special . . . but this was a secret I hated keeping.

For the past six years, I had wanted so desperately to belong. Even if I’d never be Remarkable, I wanted a guild to call my own. Just getting in would mean the world to me. After all, each guild was like a family. And I didn’t have that anymore.

I’d never be at the top, like the Extraordinarily Remarkables, the highest ranks in the best guilds—you could see them a block away in the capital city, draped in sparkling

gold, gobbling up fancy meals. Nor would I be above average, like the Quite Remarkables—in simple, well-made linen, loyally serving the high levels so they could have a taste of that Extraordinary life. The lowest of all Remarkables were the Slightly Remarkables—who dressed in mended hand-me-downs, and to whom everything special was beyond shut doors.

And I was at the *real* bottom. I was an Unremarkable. The *only* Unremarkable in an empire full of Remarkables. So I had always been outside the guilds' locked gates.

"We'll arrive any moment now," my Guild Matcher murmured.

We had been driving for miles and miles. The breakfast Aquaria and I had was surely a few forevers ago—it was at an inn famous for their baked beans. That showed how far away from the Capital we were, because who in their right mind travels for *beans*?

Suddenly, she veered to the right. "Here it is!"

"Eep!" I clutched on to the door handle for my life.

The gravel road widened into a small clearing. An old house made of thick oak beams sat at the far end. The wood looked dinged, and one window was boarded up. Oddly, there were a ton of pine cones piled in barrels all around.

"We made it in great time. I'll be able to get back to the inn before sunset!" Aquaria said brightly. "Time to get you settled."

“Is this the start of the Mists?” I asked.

“Oh.” This time, *she* seemed out of words. “N-no. Not there . . .”

I could almost hear: *Not yet.*

Then I spotted a sign with the paint peeling: *The Guild of Pine Cone Collectors.*

Pine cones. I’d be hunting pine cones for the rest of my life. Endless mountains to climb, countless streams to wade through—and not a book anywhere in sight. Would a guild focused on pine cones actually have any quests for me to complete, so that I could pass the recruit step? But, as long as I fulfilled that first quest, as long as I was in *a* guild, maybe I could make trips down to the nearest town and find a book or two to read. If there were any towns around here . . .

The front door opened. A man with tufts of white hair scuttled forward, oddly light on his toes, and peered at me through the automobile window. His chin was sharp and his eyes were rather bulgy, like a beetle. “You! Are you the new recruit for our guild?”

I fumbled with the handle, palms sweating. “Yes. I’m *very* excited to join the Guild of Pine Cone Collectors.”

My future was right in front of me—hopefully. Surely, studying pine cones for the rest of my life was better than being cast away as an Unremarkable.

CHAPTER 2



The Guild of Matchers help high-level Remarkables transfer to top guilds, such as the Guild of the Crown. In addition, as charity, they help guildless orphans find a new home. Please note that recruits must complete one quest for entry.

—GUILD OF THE CROWN NEWS

Pa used to tell me that it's rare to be Unremarkable. That I was as rare as the storybooks we'd read together. He was trying to tell me that I was special, and that he loved me no matter what . . . Yet it wasn't good to be *this* kind of rare.

"We're thrilled to have a new recruit." The Guild Master leaned across his desk. He was pale and his lips were thin, and his limbs all spindly. "To my surprise, we haven't had anyone who's wanted to join in over twenty years—it's just me and my wife. She'll be back from her latest pine cone expedition later. So, we're willing to skip

the process of requiring recruits to complete a quest for entry, and formally have”—he squinted at me. He’d totally forgotten my name—“this wonderful addition to our Guild Registry.”

I nearly oozed to the seat with relief. *You can forget my name, but I can’t let you forget about me completely! Not if you’ll really add me to your guild, with my name in the Registry! If he sees my prophecy, though . . .*

“That is wonderful news,” Aquaria said smoothly, soft as a freshly baked cinnamon roll. “Lyra Hunt is a hard worker. She’s willing to do whatever you need so that she can stay.”

During breakfast, I’d overheard the waiter say to her, “Madame, you’re guild-matching that *eleven*-year-old girl? I’ve never heard of someone guildless that old!”

I had retreated into the shadows on the stairs as Aquaria had stabbed at her beans. “This isn’t ideal, believe me. I will not be promoted to work in the Headquarters until I place her, and I need to stay in the Capital. My mother is doing poorly.”

My stomach had lurched. I hadn’t known that.

“How ’bout I put in a word with the Guild of Servitors?” the boy offered. “Would you believe it—we accepted a Slightly Remarkable orphan from you Matchers last year—he’ll be scrubbing pots for life. What’s the matter with her?”

“Lyra, well, she’s . . .” Aquaria’s voice had lowered. I

saw her lips move, and I knew exactly what she was saying. “*Extremely Unremarkable.*”

“*Oh.*” His hands had quivered, rattling his stack of plates. “I didn’t realize Unremarkables actually *exist!*”

Aquaria had let out a soft sigh. “She’s . . . she is the only Unremarkable, yes. In the entire empire.”

The waiter had looked like he wanted to drop his dishes and sprint out the door. “She might bring a curse upon the Guild of Matchers—on you—on *all* of us! Doesn’t she need to get sent to the Mists?”

My Guild Matcher shook her head. “I still have some time to find her a guild before she turns twelve.”

“*Ahem!*”

I was drawn out of my thoughts. The Guild Master of Pine Cone Collectors tapped the desk. “Your birth certificate. Where is it? I’ll stamp it with my Guild Seal. The pine cones don’t wait around for us, you know. Although, some pine cones stay on their trees for more than ten years, ha ha!”

“Right here, Guild Master.” Aquaria plucked the folder out of my sweaty clutches and handed it over. My heart thumped in my ears. *Ba-dum. Ba-dum . . .*

The Guild Master scooted aside a few pine cones on his desk and flipped it open. My birth certificate looked so pretty: thick paper, gold-swirled edges, painted by a high-level member of the Guild of Records.

It was so beautiful . . . except for what it said:

— LYRA HUNT —

BIRTHDATE: The Seventh Day, in the Seventh
Month, in the Thirty-Fifth Year of
Empress Sora

GUILD:

PROPHECY: Extremely Unremarkable

My heart beat even louder. *BA-DUM, BA-DUM.* I shrank down, my shoulders coming up to my ears as I waited for his shout. For his chair to upturn—like the Master of the Guild of Tapestries—or maybe for him to faint—

He merely peered at the side of the room. “I’ll grab the Guild Registry . . .”

My jaw dropped. He didn't mind? Could this really be . . . I glanced between the crusty windows, piles of pine cones all around, the scuttling bug in the corner, and the door leading back to the absolutely silent hallway. These were all signs of an *extremely* unpopular guild. That didn't matter. This could become my home . . . with a brisk cleaning or two. My sister wouldn't have to worry about me anymore!

I spotted a stack of something absolutely beautiful, and my voice got squeaky. “You have books, Guild Master?”

Words—words were *precious*. More precious than anything I’d found in the empire. My family was no longer at my side, but the books we’d read together stayed in my

memory. I'd retell the stories to myself during long days of chores at guilds that didn't want me or on car rides with Aquaria, when my stomach was sloshing from nervousness. Stories—just like my family—never told me that I was Unremarkable. The words simply invited me in, beckoning as soft as a cloudlike pillow, a place for me to rest.

The Guild Master glanced over at the long-forgotten pile, nearly hidden under a thick sheet of dust. “Ah, yes, I think that was the previous Guild Master's. Or the Guild Master before her, I'm not sure.”

Hope swelled in me as he scuttled to a display case and moved aside more pine cones. There was the Guild Registry, locked in the glass. The cover was stamped with a lot of pine cones. I didn't mind, not if this was going to be my guild. The Registry enchanted me—it was the one book that my name could be *in*.

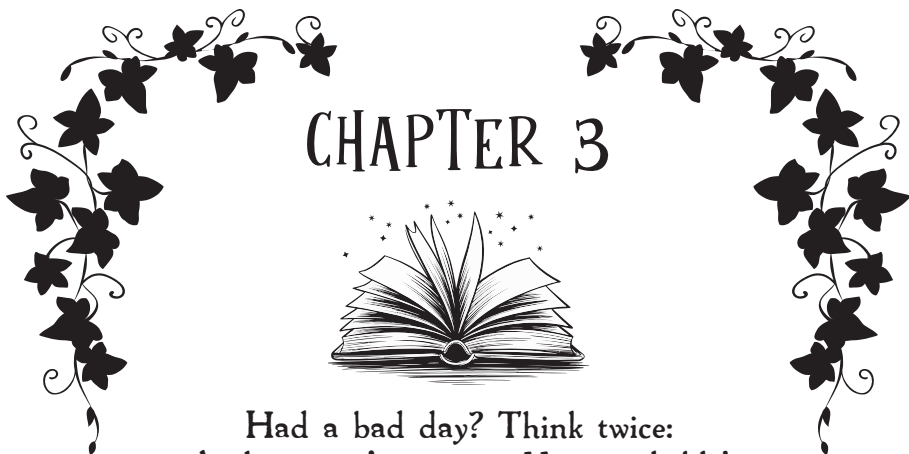
He muttered, “Where's my . . .”

“Your key?” I piped up helpfully. “On the chain around your neck, sir.”

“No, not that . . .” He fumbled with something on the case and pulled it toward him with an unpleasant *scritch*. The old man turned around, his eyes overly magnified as he peered at us through a set of spectacles. “My reading glasses. Now I can see.”

Oh no.

I was going to throw up my buttered beans.



Had a bad day? Think twice:
At least you're not an Unremarkable!

—GUILD OF THE CROWN NEWS

Aquaria jumped up. “Oh, a spider!” She laughed and shuffled my papers around. “Never mind, a trick of the light!”

The sky was cloudy, but it felt like the room had brightened. Aquaria had moved the folder over my prophecy line.

“We must protect our new recruit’s birth certificate, of course!” The Guild Master unlocked the glass case and brought over the Guild Registry.

I couldn’t breathe. The Registry was beautiful. This was everything I’d always dreamed of. A place to belong, completely.

And, finally, the Registry was right in front of me.

The Guild Master peered through his spectacles expectantly. “Do you solemnly swear that you want to explore the empire for pine cones of all shapes and sizes? To help fulfill our mission of finding a more sustainable fuel and food source for our empire, as requested by the former Emperor?”

“Um, yes! I simply can’t wait.” It was true. Because, if this could be my home, I’d do anything—

He nodded.

Joy swooped through me. For once, the winds of fate were in my favor.

The wonderful, best-in-the-empire Guild Master cracked open the Registry. I sighed with awe. Names were scrawled across the pages. I’d be in there, too, in just a few minutes.

The Guild Master picked up his fountain pen and dipped the nib in ink. “Your name . . . Lyra Hunt. I haven’t heard of the Hunts before.”

“My family was in the Guild of Paperweights,” I explained. “In one of the minor cities by the Capital.” The only members, though he didn’t need to know that.

“She’s orphaned,” Aquaria added. “Her mother passed away from influenza when she was quite young, and her father a mere two years after that, so without any adults, the Guild closed.”

My parents were Slightly Remarkable, so they were barely anything to the empire. But they were everything to

me. Ma passed away when I was three. Still, I remember her hand on my chin and her kisses on my forehead. Pa would hug me tight whenever I cried. He never let me feel bad for my tears. My older sister, Sylvie, always protected me. Even if it meant giving the village kids a piece of her mind for making fun of my prophecy or the unfashionable dresses that Pa sewed for us . . .

But, speaking of outfits . . .

The Guild Master's poofy sleeve. His *sleeve*. It caught against the folder, dragging it down.

Revealing my birth certificate in its entirety.

Just. My. Luck.

Maybe he won't notice, maybe he—

His eyes bulged.

Not a sound was made. Not even the bugs in the corner skittered around.

In the deathly quiet, he stared at my birth certificate, then up at me.

Finally, he spoke. His voice was colder than a blizzard swooping down the peaks of the Alterran Mountains.

“Extremely Unremarkable?”

Yes, that was definitely me: Unremarkable and unlucky.

“Guild Matcher Aquaria, are you trying to bring a curse upon the Guild of Pine Cone Collectors? Do you want us to disappear, like the curse the last Extremely Unremarkable brought upon the Guild of Button Collectors, five hundred years ago? They lost all of their button

quests in the span of a day!”

He jabbed his finger toward the door and yelled, “*Out!* Guards! Do not let this girl—this *Unremarkable* Lyra Hunt—into our guild ever again!”

There weren’t even any guards here. I opened my mouth. “Sir, if you just give me a chance—”

But he kept shouting, so Aquaria guided me out the door. I tried to keep my shoulders straight and pretended that this rejection didn’t hurt.

“Another guild.” Aquaria strode toward her car as the shouts of the Guild Master echoed behind us. “Another guild will be the one.”

“There aren’t any guilds *left*,” I whispered.

She paused briefly before continuing, “Oh my, you’ve only got half a year left to find a guild . . . Though, not to worry about that, yet.”

I had been worrying for years, though. I started worrying when I got my first rejection at five years old, from the Guild of Warriors, nestled in the bustle of the Capital. A thunderous look jolted across the Warrior’s face when Aquaria had shown him my birth certificate—no Warrior wanted to waste their time on a lowly recruit. No one wanted an *Unremarkable* to be a fighter for the empire.

News of my prophecy had blazed through the Headquarters like wildfire as I followed Aquaria out. The disapproving glares were sharper than blades. *Unremarkable, Unremarkable. They shouldn’t even exist in the empire.*

I had bowed my head, my eyes burning with tears. At least I could hold a dagger, unlike the Slightly Remarkable boy who grabbed the blade instead of the handle and was accepted anyway because his father had donated twenty gold coins.

On the darkening horizon, storm clouds rumbled. I could almost hear whispers in their shadows. I knew, down to my bones, my terrifying fate:

If no guild will take me, I will be banished.