

*Fates Aflame*

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## **CHARACTERS:**

**Valhara Hawksford:** (val-HAR-uh HAWKS-ferd)

18-year-old Celestial Galaxy Lieutenant. Sister of Major Atira Hawksford.

**Mattheia Draven:** (MATH-ee-ay DRAY-ven)

High Commander, Silver Diamond Academy, Mainlands.

**Amanda Quill:** (uh-MAN-duh kwill)

Private First Class, Silver Diamond Academy.

**Jaksiun Ray:** (JACK-see-un)

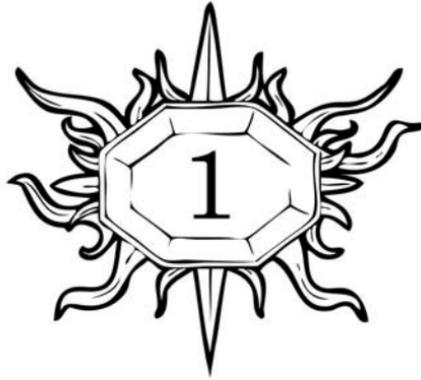
Childhood friend and Celestial Galaxy training partner of Lieutenant Valhara Hawksford.

**Captain Lansfora:** (LANS-four-uh)

Captain of Silver Diamond Academy.

**Captain Ventresca:** (VEN-tress-kuh)

Captain of Celestial Galaxy Academy.



**C**onsumed by anger and forced to hide my feelings from the world, I wept behind closed doors. A riveting ache pierced my temples and my face flushed with heat. The captain's decision spurred a bout of nausea to squeeze my stomach, cold sweat beading on my forehead.

I wanted to wake from the nightmarish reality.

I hadn't worked so hard to become a pawn in a political game, and my captain couldn't push me around because his priorities weren't in order anymore.

He'd scheduled me to temporarily transfer to Silver Diamond Academy—the Mainland's most prestigious military school—to tie up "loose" ends. Whatever that meant. *Dirty work*, more like it, disguised as formalities to make both academies look good in light of recent, petty power struggles.

Why me? Why now? The two academies have been at each other's throats for at least a decade, each trying to one-up the other in an effort to gain worldwide recognition.

My chair teetered on two legs as my feet pressed against the wall behind my desk and I pushed back. A scream swelled in my chest, clanging at my ribs, banging on my lungs, but I smothered the desire as quickly as I could. Making my discomfort known wouldn't change a thing, and it would only make me look weak and... *unqualified*.

Top of my class. I didn't get here by pouting and questioning orders. I worked hard. I listened. I contributed.

Now there were no contributions to be made, and I had no say in the matter.

As a lower ranking official of Celestial Galaxy, I shouldn't have been given such a prominent assignment, but the captain and my sister—a major—had their own scandal to keep secret.

They assumed I didn't know what they were hiding, like I was a child who wouldn't catch on. I wasn't blind to the odd glances they'd been exchanging lately. The subtle scent of his aftershave, cologne, (whatever it was), wafted from her when she hugged me goodnight. It was so obvious. Aтира had always admired our captain, but admiration had evolved into something more.

For their safety, I held my tongue and pretended not to notice, but now I couldn't stop myself from scrutinizing every single order the captain gave. Was he really putting his

best judgment forward, or were many of his decisions tainted by his desire to keep his love-interest out of harm's way? Of course, I wanted my sister to be safe, but not at the cost of her integrity.

No one should hide stuff like that. Not from family.

All four chair legs hit the floor again. I tucked my hands behind my elbows, rested my arms on my desk, and then nestled my head upon them, taking in a deep breath and exhaling loudly.

I wanted to deny it, but it wasn't only jealousy sucking the strength from me. Something deeper and more sinister prickled my soul.

I hadn't been home to Earth and the Mainlands for years.

Not since *the accident*.



The switch on my desk clicked and the blinds opened on the far side of my room, flooding the walls with cascading rays of warm, artificial sunlight. I blinked, adjusting to the brightness, and then rubbed my tired eyes with my palms.

I twisted thick locks of my hair together and tied them, as neatly as I could, into a high ponytail at the back of my head. People complimented me a lot on my red hair, but most of the time I didn't know what to do with it. In my line of work, there are few style options.

Some rogue strands on the left side of my face were always too short to tie back, so I clipped them out of the way with a silver, cherry blossom-shaped barrette. It was small, but the gift from my mom meant the world to me.

It was my lucky charm... and all I had left to remember her by.

I'd decided to stay at Celestial Galaxy year-round because I didn't want to return to Earth and tear open old wounds—the scars I carried from my parents' untimely, tragic deaths. Captain Ventresca's assignment meant I *had* to go back, whether I wanted to or not.

"*Hey, Sis,*" Atira's voice resonated from the callbox on my door. "*Can I come in?*"

"Sure." I tapped a button on my desk and the door whooshed open.

My sister entered and the door closed behind her.

"Feeling lucky today?" she asked with a smile, eyeing the hair clip already.

I sighed and shrugged. "Not really."

"Mom's flower." She pointed to it and flopped down on the edge of my bed beside me, draping an arm across my shoulders. "You're worried about this thing, aren't you?"

"Who wouldn't be? The captain should have picked someone else, and you know it." I crossed my arms and looked away.

"You're strong, Sis." She squeezed me closer and nudged me encouragingly. "He trusts you because he knows you can

do this. Why else would he have sent you?"

*Because he didn't want to send you...*

Trust had very little to do with it. I shifted my weight. "Atira, Silver Diamond is a *very* different academy, and I'm scared they won't take me seriously. I didn't work my butt off here to be dropped off at a school that basically hates us for existing."

"Sis," Atira turned me toward her and looked me in the eye, "I don't think that's the real reason why you're so upset. You're not one to back down from a challenge. You never have been."

My throat tightened.

She was right.

I felt tears creeping back up and I squeezed my eyes shut tightly to force them down.

"All things happen for a reason," she said. "Think of this as an opportunity to branch out. You'll pick up some stuff there you probably never could have learned here. Try to make some friends. Just don't let what happened years ago stop you from living today."

"Do you miss them?" I looked her square in the face.

Atira's smile melted away and she took a deep breath.

"Every day."

"Me, too."

She rubbed my shoulder and worked up a fresh smile.

"But being afraid to return to Earth isn't going to bring them back. Nothing will. Not fear. Not hate. You just have to find

the courage to move forward.”

“Have you?”

“Have I what?”

“Found the courage? Have you let it go?”

“Well, no, but...”

“Then how do you expect me to?”

“I...” She paused and looked away, nibbling her lip. “I don’t expect you to let it go and I’d be lying if I told you *I* had. But I *do* expect you to push forward with your life. Find your place, Valhara. Reach as far as you can and make a difference in this world. Mom and Dad would have wanted you to, and they would have been proud to see how far you’ve already come.”

She leaned in closer and lovingly traced Mom’s hair clip with the tip of her index finger.

“I know it’s cliché to say this, but I’ll be up here, watching over you while you’re there. In any way I can.” Her fingers grasped my shoulder. “I love ya, Sis. I want you to be happy, okay? Do great things. For me. For *them*.”

It didn’t really make me feel much better, but I knew she’d meant every word of it. Her sweet, encouraging smile lifted some of the anger from my heart and I grinned back.

“I’ll do my best. For you and for Mom and Dad.”



**L**ieutenant, we need to leave soon.”

I pressed the intercom button on my desk to reply. “I know. Come in, Ray.”

The door slid open and Lieutenant Jacksiun Ray entered my room.

“Are you ready to go?” He looked at the pile of paperwork scattered across my desk and then grazed over the laundry sprawled out on my bed. He tipped his head down and narrowed his eyes.

“Almost.” I folded a pair of dark-green slacks and tucked them into my suitcase while he watched.

“Do you need any help?” He lifted his gaze and pressed a finger along the bridge of his slender nose to slide his glasses back up his face.

“No, thanks.” I unplugged my laptop and tossed it on top of the folded clothes, then I reached for a stack of paper—admission forms—on my desk.

Jacksium stretched an arm out to me. “Don’t forget the—”

“Thanks!” I snatched the charging cable from his hand and threw it into the outside pocket of the luggage.

“What else do I need?” I muttered as I shoved past him to grab a shirt out of my dresser. “I hate traveling. I don’t want to forget anything.”

I hadn’t packed a suitcase in years and I didn’t want to be unprepared. It wasn’t like I was going for a week. I was going to be there for an entire semester—*six months*.

Six months is a long time to be stuck in a place where you don’t know anyone.

*What if they hate me?*

*What if everyone thinks I’m too young to be—*

A hand pressed against my forearm and I veered my head.

“Valhara, please.” Jacksium looked me firmly in the eye. “Calm down.” His voice was comforting.

I dropped the pair of shoes I was holding and huffed. “How? How do I calm down wh-when all of *this* is happening to me right now?”

“Breathe,” he said in a soft, patient tone.

I looked at his fingers as they squeezed my arm gently, wanting to raise my voice at him and tell him to let go, but...

I hugged him instead.

“I don’t want to go,” I grumbled against his chest. He released my arm and hugged me.

“I know. I know, Valhara,” he said, his embrace tightening. “But you have to. It’s for the best. Really, it is.”

He was so much taller than me that his hugs were kind of all encompassing. They made me feel safe, as if he were my big brother. Who was I kidding? He practically was.

Accomplice. Peacemaker. Best friend in *literally* the entire galaxy. Jacksiun wore a lot of hats, and I was grateful for that.

“You’re going to be fine.” He let go and then playfully tapped the tip of my nose with his finger. I laughed and shook my head, trying to fake a scowl. *As if I cared.* Anyone else would have gotten a swift kick in the shin for a move like that, but his calming blue eyes and good nature had never given me a reason to be upset. “It’s only going to be for one term. Six months. That’s all.” He smiled reassuringly. “You’ll be back here before you know it. Maybe you’ll make some new friends while you’re there.”

“Why does everyone want me to *make friends* there?” I cocked an eyebrow. “Are you guys planning on replacing me while I’m gone?”

“Of course not!” He chuckled. “Don’t be silly, Valhara.”

“Do boyfriends count?” I snickered. *Touché!*

“What?” He scowled and shook his head adamantly.

“No. No, they don’t. I said *friends*.” He did air quotes. “Not

*boyfriends*. I'm not going to be there to look out for you."

I laughed and patted him on the shoulder before he could get any more flustered. "I was *joking*." I did air quotes back. "Don't worry. I won't parade around like I'm Celestial Galaxy's most eligible Lieutenant." I sighed. "I know the rules around here, unlike *some* people."

"She'll tell you when she feels the time is right." He sat on the chair beside my desk and clasped his hands together in his lap.

I tried not to roll my eyes as I folded my last shirt and stuffed it into the bag with a good shove. Jacksiun was an observant guy, but... "You know about *them*?" I asked, zipping the luggage closed.

"Yes."

I groaned.

"I won't tell anyone," he said.

I believed him, but he wasn't the one I was concerned with. How many other people knew? Or... suspected something?

"I don't think anyone else knows, Valhara," he added, as if he'd just read my mind. "If that makes you feel better. We're close, us three. It's more obvious to us than it is to other people. Atira and the captain aren't fools. They'll keep quiet about it."

I froze in place and shook my head. "I wish she'd tell me. Why does she have to hide it from her own sister?"

"She loves you, Valhara. Maybe she doesn't want you to

worry about them. It could be a lot of things. I can't really say I understand, either, but she's smart. She has her reasons."

"Do they have swords there?" I carefully lifted the Azure Phoenix from its mount on the wall behind my desk and held it.

"At Silver Diamond? I'm not sure. They're well known for their artillery classes, but I don't know if they do sword training. You could bring it anyway. Just in case."

I balanced the light-weight, deeply serrated-edged, brass-colored blade in my hands and then set it on my desk. There was a polishing cloth in the top drawer. I used it to wipe some fingerprints off the four talons protruding from the pommel and then swept over the crimson orb embedded in the center of them. The blade granted a cold welcome to anyone who dared attack from behind. Misused or misheld, however, it came with a risk to the bearer, too.

There wasn't another blade like it in the world. It was said to have been forged with a blend of platinum and molten phoenix blood, attributing to its dark, brassy sheen. It was called the Azure Phoenix because of the blue-white heat created while tempering it into the unbreakable blade it was rumored to be.

"Will they get worried if I show up with a sword like this? Wouldn't it be safer here with you?"

"It's yours, Valhara." Jacksiun stood. "You earned it because you're a great, intelligent warrior. Ancient treasures

like it don't pop up every day. They'll take notice, and if they have any sense at all, they'll respect you for your prowess."

My stupid eyes were getting all watery again. I sucked in a deep breath and blinked, trying to resist my emotions.

"Well, that's everything, I think." I looped my leather scabbard over my head, dropped it down to my waist, and buckled the second strap near my hip. I reached behind my head and carefully snapped the sword against the custom-made, hybrid magnet attached to the back.

Jacksiun reached for my suitcase and dragged it off my bed. It hit the floor with a loud thud, catching him off-guard with its deceptive heft.

"Let's go. The captain's waiting." His brow furrowed and he looked down. "Did you put bricks in here while I wasn't looking?"

"Only a few," I replied with an innocent smirk.

He laughed.

I glanced around my room at my barren desk, empty dresser, and freshly-made bed.

"Goodbye for now," I whispered and then sighed.

I had no choice but to face my fears. I had to do what Captain Ventresca had requested of me. It was my responsibility as Lieutenant.

"Valhara?" A hand pressed against my shoulder again and I flinched.

"It will be here when you get back," Jacksiun said with a confident grin. "I can promise you that."

“I know.” He was right, as always.

We walked down the main station corridor toward the docking bay. Bright fluorescent lights leading the way stretched on for seemingly ever. We passed half a dozen classrooms, each filled with students sitting at their desks with tablet screens glowing beneath their fingers as they listened intently to the lecturer at the head of the room.

I had been in those very same classrooms less than two years ago. Writing essays. Cramming. Trying to pass final exams so I could keep rank and make my sister proud. They’d thrown me into advanced classes when I was only fourteen—only two years after enlisting—and most of the kids there were much older than I was.

Except Jacksiun. He was a prodigy child whose inherited wit had landed him grades he’d never seemed like he had studied hard enough to earn. I was so jealous of him then. He’d be reclining in a chair reading some book, while I was working my rear end off trying to get a passing grade.

Jacksiun was intelligent by nature, but I’ve always been a fast learner, and talent like that will get you noticed here.

The elevator door chimed and Jacksiun wheeled my suitcase inside. He typed in the docking bay floor code and the elevator doors closed. We began to descend. There were exactly one hundred floors in the academy and all lieutenants were assigned rooms on the ninety-eighth, so the ride down to the first floor took several moments. I kept my head

down and tried not to breathe too loudly. My heartbeat raced and the intense anxiety coursing through me made me feel like I was lucid dreaming. Only, I had no control over the outcome, or my captain's orders.

I sensed Jacksiun watching me, but didn't open my mouth, for fear I'd say something unfitting of my rank. I was already beginning to miss him and we hadn't even stepped foot in Silver Diamond. A jittery, sick feeling made my chest hurt and I had to keep sucking in deep breaths and squeezing my eyes closed to keep from bursting into tears.

Maybe it was stupid and immature of me to be freaking out like a child, but I couldn't help it.

The elevator came to a halt with a faint ding and the doors slid open. He allowed me to exit first and then came out behind me with the baggage.

The docking bay bustled with people. Personnel hauled boxes and unknown spacecraft parts between various rooms. We passed a team of mechanics discussing something about "stabilizers" and "supersonic inlets." Whatever those were. I could have asked Jacksiun and he'd have been able to tell me, but I wasn't in the mood for spacecraft talk. Ships were his thing, not mine.

"Where to?" I asked, scanning the massive room. Most of the ships had been tucked away in their respective garages, but a few were out in the open and being tinkered with by the maintenance crew. I didn't recognize any of them, but I'd heard a new fleet had been commissioned re-

cently, so the designs were still fairly new.

“To your left,” he replied with a nod in the direction.  
“You can’t miss it.”

I turned and gasped.

*It was huge.*

“Meet the Goliath.” Jacksiun propped my suitcase up on its wheels and pointed toward the enormous, beast of a ship.

Gunmetal in color, square and boxy around the sides—vaguely reminiscent of a large four-legged animal (a lion?) sitting at attention. It was sleek and sharp toward the front and, from what I could see, both sides were flanked with elaborate, wing-like motifs. I couldn’t tell if it was aerodynamic or just meant to look intimidating. Both, perhaps.

“So this is where all that flight training has gotten you?” I asked. “It’s giant. It never looked *that* big on a screen.”

Although he hadn’t been an officially delegated academy pilot, Jacksiun had been studying flight and ship construction and repair since his first semester. It was more of a hobby and passion than a work requirement. For years, he’d rambled on about how he’d someday pilot the rare and legendary thing that was Celestial Galaxy’s elite Goliath. I used to laugh at him and tell him they were pipe dreams.

The joke was on me now.

He took the handle of my suitcase again and started wheeling it toward the loading ramp. My neck craned back as I swept over the intricate underbelly of the monstrous ship. Rows of hypnotic green and gold lights sparkled on

and off in rhythmic patterns. Large orbs of some kind radiated red pulsations of light and a whoosh of hot air gushed past us from whirring exhaust fans as we approached the large metal bridge that would take us inside.

“Isn’t it incredible?” Jacksiun asked, closing his eyes as the gust of warmth made locks of his kept, black hair dance across his brow. He hastily swept them back into place with a brush of his hand. “You’re lucky, Valhara,” he said, turning to look at me. “The Goliath can get us to Earth in hours instead of days. Have you ever seen a more remarkable ship in the entire galaxy?” There was a huge grin across his lips and an intense sparkle of awe in his sky-blue eyes.

Today was his day, even if it wasn’t mine.



**T**he complex procedures that had to occur before we could depart baffled me, and all I could do was watch as personnel readied the Goliath for flight. Jacksiun helped me get situated in my seat, first securing my sword and luggage in a special lockbox in a large side panel of the main bridge, and next showing me how to properly use the safety restraints on my chair. He did it all in a way that didn't make me feel like a child, though, and I appreciated that.

Afterward, he left me alone for several minutes and went to discuss flight plans with some of the others on board. Although programmed to be self-sufficient overall, the Goliath required a small crew to assure everything ran as programmed. This dedicated group of trained experts supervised ship functions in the rare case something may have

an error and require manual control.

Jacksium had been assigned to captain the ship for my flight, and I couldn't have asked for a more reliable person to trust with my life. This was a very exclusive and rare opportunity our captain had given him, and he took it very seriously. It wasn't like him to strap himself into a hyper jet and go exploring the universe, but if weird noises starting coming from the thrusters, he'd know how to troubleshoot the problem better than any standard issue academy pilot.

I tangled my fingers around the thick nylon seatbelt strapped across my lap and stared up at the ceiling. The grey interior had olive green filigree and metallic gold accents along the perimeter of the walls as well as on all the control consoles in the room. Green and gold were Celestial Galaxy's emblem colors and I'd become accustomed to seeing them on *literally everything*. But the delicate, intricate designs swirling around corners and edges of the nearby chairs and control panels had regal flair, and I felt honored to be surrounded by such exquisite craftsmanship. The Goliath was the golden chariot of our academy, and I was privileged to be riding in it.

"Is it everything you thought it would be?" Jacksium asked, approaching me from behind and patting my shoulder.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" I shifted in my chair; the belt constricted my movement.

He took his seat in the large, rounded Commander's

chair a few feet across from mine and spun it around to face me. “Everything and more,” he answered, beaming. “The simulations have nothing on the real thing.” He caught me tugging my seatbelt and furrowed his brow. “It’s going to be a five-and-a-half-hour flight. Are you comfortable?”

“As comfortable as I can be.” I shrugged. “It’s my nerves more than anything.”

“Ah. I figured that. You’ll be fine.” He swerved back around and punched some colorful keys on the long, arched keypad in front of him. The floor rumbled softly beneath my feet as the engines kicked on and the thrusters propelled us out of the docking bay. I watched on a monitor to my left as the bright lights of the academy vanished from sight, consumed by inky blackness and endless space.

“There won’t be much to see from this point forward,” Jacksiun spoke to me over his shoulder. “We’ll be there soon and you’ll be back here before you know it. Why don’t you rest your eyes a bit?”

My eyes didn’t need resting.

“I would if I could.” I glanced forward at the glass viewing panel spanning the length of the front of the room. He was right. Nothing much to look at.

“I’m sorry. I know you can’t sleep when you’re anxious.” He leaned forward, reading a long strip of dialog text appearing on a screen at the front of the bridge. “Let me know if you need anything, Lieutenant.”

“Will do.” I tried to smile but couldn’t. It wasn’t like he

could see me with his back turned, anyway.



A sharp beeping sound jolted me to attention. I lifted my face up from my computer, leaned to the side, stretched my neck, and squinted to try to get a better look at Jacksiun's screen.

"Is that supposed to happen?" I asked, my heartbeat spiking.

"Yes. Everything's fine. It's a transmission from Silver Diamond. I'll patch it through to the main projector."

A beam of light poured from a projection system overhead and an image appeared on the far wall. It flashed an animation of the Silver Diamond logo—a black globe containing four colored gem-like accents representing the cardinal points and a diamond-shape overlapping the design. The initials 'S' and 'D' rotated in the center in elegant black serif font.

A stout, middle-aged man with a shaved head and black uniform with green trim along the collar came on screen.

"This is Sergeant Joe Shunckly of Silver Diamond Academy. State your flight jurisdiction code, please."

Jacksiun didn't miss a beat, and before I could tuck my laptop away, he'd already rattled off a dozen seemingly random numbers and letters to the sergeant.

A moment of silence passed and Sergeant Shunckly gave

a nod of approval. "Cleared. Captain Lansfora is expecting you. You have been granted permission to enter the academy flight zone. We will have the tarmac cleared for your landing momentarily."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Jacksiun replied.

The light beam faded and the image went away. The sooty grey showing through the main window across from us slowly changed color and brightened as we entered Earth's atmosphere. A series of buttons flashed on Jacksiun's control panel and I panicked again as turbulence caused the floor beneath my feet to quake. Reality set in once again.

*This is really happening.*

I took a deep breath and exhaled.

We landed safely and Jacksiun stood from his chair and came over to me. He ordered a crew member to retrieve my personal items and then bent over to look me in the eye.

"We've arrived. Let's go," he said. Now that everyone was out of earshot, his voice softened. "I'll be at your side for as long as I can, Valhara. I know you still don't want to do this, but I promise you, it's for the best."

"I know." I relieved myself of my seatbelt and stood, wobbling a moment on tingling legs. "My things?" I noticed someone removing them from the locker.

"The security office needs to inspect them first, so I'm sending them ahead of us to speed up the process."

I feared for the Azure Phoenix, unjustifiably, perhaps,

but I couldn't help but worry about being separated from the priceless sword. I'd almost gotten killed trying to acquire it years ago and it meant a lot to me. "You're sure that—"

"It will be fine," Jacksiun said with an air of confidence. "Trust me. I've never steered you wrong before, have I?"

*Never.* I shook my head.

I polished the small golden sun emblems on my left and right lapels and then brushed both hands down my shirt to smooth some of the wrinkles.

"Captain Lansfora is waiting." Jacksiun escorted me to the main elevator which took us back down to the loading bridge.

I stepped onto the tarmac and took in a deep breath of crisp, fresh air. Grass. Sea water. Concrete. Jet fuel. So many smells hit me all at once that I was taken aback. Back to my last day on Earth—the day Jacksiun and I boarded the Celestial Galaxy recruitment ship and left for what I thought would be forever. Six years ago. Six years I'd been running away from this place only for it to chase me down and drag me back on its own.

"Lieutenant Hawksford. Lieutenant Ray." A brunette girl with a tight, high ponytail, accented with two perfect braids on each side of her head, saluted us with her hand flat and rigid above her brow and then brought it down in a sweeping, arcing movement to her heart, palm up.

"I am Private First Class Amanda Quill and I will be your

personal escort from this point forward.” It surprised me how young Private Quill looked; she appeared to be a few years my junior.

Her thigh-length, jet-black uniform had royal-purple piping trimming the high-collar, chest pockets, epaulets, and in a band around each cuff. Large, white diamond outlines were on the bicep of each sleeve and she wore a matching decorative belt at her waist. The uniforms were much more elaborate than my own forest green and grey with simple, notched lapels, but Silver Diamond had been well known for its elegance and intricacies in every detail of their organization.

“Here.” Private Quill handed the two of us laminated visitor cards which we then clipped to our left chest pockets. “I will take you through security and then to meet with our captain. Come this way.” She turned, with precision, and we followed her across the tarmac to the academy entrance.

Matte-coated glass walls flanked the entire building on all sides. I could barely see our muddled reflections as we approached the entrance gate. A motion sensor beeped and the tall glass sliding doors pulled apart. We were shuttled through security scanners by two screening personnel and then rejoined by Private Quill moments later.

I was quick to notice how different personnel had different colored trims. I recalled Sergeant Shunckly’s had been green and securities’ were orange. It must have been part of Diamond’s elaborate ranking system. I’d heard about it—

among other things—and it sounded so confusing at first. Now that I was actually seeing it in action, it made perfect sense.

“This way, please,” Private Quill announced, directing us down a long hallway of classrooms. As we walked, I saw several students at their desks through the windows. They, too, had purple trim on their uniforms, but many also had light blue or yellow. “Lieutenant Hawksford,” the private started, “should you ever—on the rare occasion—find yourself lost in our academy, always know that the colored lines on the floor will lead you to wherever it is you wish to go.” She slowed down and pointed at the grey marble tile floor. Small lines of color ran along the length near the walls, some branching off in other directions up ahead. “Orange will always lead back to the tarmac and loading areas. Blue is for the offices of all professors and student staff. Ruby is elite housing. Purple is the student dormitory. Those are all the ones you’ll need to know for now. You’ll catch on as you make your way around our academy. I believe the captain has assigned you with an advisor for your time here, as well.”

*An advisor?*

I glanced at Jacksiun and he shrugged as if he’d had no idea what she was talking about. No one had said anything about having to have a babysitter while I was there. They did realize I was *one* promotion away from becoming a major, right? Or did no one tell them that?

I shook it off and continued behind the private as she

pointed at a set of black doors in the distance. “The meeting hall is down there.”

We approached the heavy black steel doors and a guard at the entrance made one quick pass up and down each of our sides with a portable security scanner. He gave Private Quill a nod of approval.

The guard pressed his hand onto a square of black glass beside the doorframe and a red light flashed beneath his fingers. The double-doors opened automatically.

The meeting space was large and well-lit. A long, oblong table that sat around twenty (with a quick chair count) took precedence in the center of the room. At the far end sat the academy captain.

“The lieutenants from C.G. are here to see you, Sir,” said Private Quill, walking ahead of us.

Upon our entrance, he stood at attention.

“Thank you, Private,” he said. “Thank you for coming, Lieutenants. Please have a seat.” He gestured to his side.

Jacksiun was quick to pull out a chair for me and then, after I sat, took a seat beside me.

Captain Lansfora’s uniform was also jet-black, but his trim and belt buckle were bright, metallic gold. His high collar had a matching gold diamond pinned on the left side and, unlike other personnel there, his cuffs had three gold bands around them instead of one or two. Just above his right shirt pocket, a gold starburst badge with an engraving of the academy logo surrounded by four colored crystals

shined. The diamond outlines on his biceps matched the stripes on his sleeves.

“Let me be the first to say how very honored we are to have you here,” he said, smiling warmly at us and tipping his head. It *seemed* genuine. “Welcome to Silver Diamond Academy. I do hope it is all you had imagined it would be.”

“It is a very beautiful school, Sir,” I said, clasping my hands on top of the table to stop myself from fidgeting. “I am honored to be here.” Really, though, I was freaking out inside again. Any minute now, Jacksiun would get up and leave and I’d be stuck for six months in some strange place I’d never been before, on a planet where my last memories were despicable ones.

“I understand there may be some tension in you right now because all this is so very new and different,” Captain Lansfora continued. “I’m sure you’re feeling a little overwhelmed at this point, Lieutenant, and that’s very normal.”

Was my face bright red? It didn’t feel that way.

“But your participation in the formulation and execution of an academy treaty is imperative, and your work here will be significant. Captain Ventresca told me a lot about you and sent you here with high recommendations. I’ve read up on your records and past accomplishments and I agree with his decision to choose you. For this reason, I’ve assigned my second-in-command to work with you during your stay. Excuse me for one moment.” At the head of the table was a flat, black intercom box with various colored tabs. He pressed a

blue one down until it lit. "Commander Draven? I requested your presence at the conference hall this morning." He released the button.

Silence.

He pressed again. "Commander?"

*"I'll be right there, Sir,"* someone finally responded. The intercom clicked off.

"He will be here momentarily. Did you have any questions for me, Lieutenants?" Captain Lansfora looked at me and then to Jacksiun.

"Just one, Sir," Jacksiun said, lifting a hand. "If I may."

"You are welcome to speak freely in this room, Lieutenant Ray."

"I mean no disrespect, and I am only asking to settle my own curiosity. Has Commander Draven been here long? Our captain has not spoken of him before."

"I understand your concern," Lansfora replied. "Commander Draven has been a student here since he was enlisted at age ten. Before I became Captain several years back, I was one of his trainers and I worked closely with him throughout his studies. He's highly versatile and extremely intelligent. He was promoted to my second-in-command two years ago, which may be why your captain is not too familiar with him yet. I can assure you, personally, that Lieutenant Hawksford will be in capable hands with his guidance."

A beep sounded from the far side of the room.

“Sir.” Private Quill saluted the man who entered.

He stopped in the doorway to acknowledge her and then approached us. He was a lot younger than I’d imagined him to be. Light, golden blonde hair—uncommon on Celestial Galaxy. He couldn’t have been much older than my sister, and yet, he was second-in-command?

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Captain,” he said, clearing his throat and tugging at the cuffs of his sleeves. “I lost track of time and—”

“No need to apologize, Commander,” the captain cut him off. “This is Lieutenant Valhara Hawksford. She is the student I’ve assigned to you while she works with us on the academy partnership agreement.”

He looked me in the eye and flinched. Briefly, but he did, and I noticed. It made me uncomfortable. Was he expecting someone else? Maybe he didn’t want anything to do with me—another reason why he had been late to the meeting. He *did* appear flustered...

“Would you take a seat, please?”

Commander Draven pulled out a chair across from me and sat. He messed with the high collar of his jacket. His uniform mirrored the captain’s, only all the trim and accents were metallic platinum instead of gold.

“This is her traveling companion, Lieutenant Jacksiun Ray,” the captain continued. “Commander Mattheia Draven will be your main contact during your stay, should you require anything at all, Lieutenant.”

The commander looked over at me, this time, with less tension in his gaze. His eyes were such a striking and unique blue color; they reminded me of Jacksiun's.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant," he said, standing from his seat to reach a hand across the table to me. I hesitated, catching on his friendly smile. Jacksiun nudged me lightly and conspicuously in the elbow.

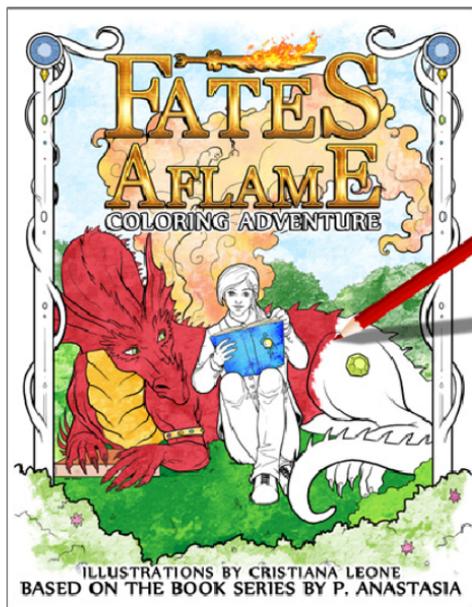
"Uh, yes. Thank you." I stood and reached out to shake his hand. "Pleasure to meet you, too, Sir." His grasp was firm and *surprisingly* cordial.

The book cover for "Fates Aflame" by P. Anastasia features a woman with long red hair wearing a green military-style jacket, holding a glowing orange and yellow orb of fire. The title "FATES AFLAME" is written in large, stylized, golden letters at the top, and the author's name "P. ANASTASIA" is at the bottom. The background is a fiery, smoky scene.

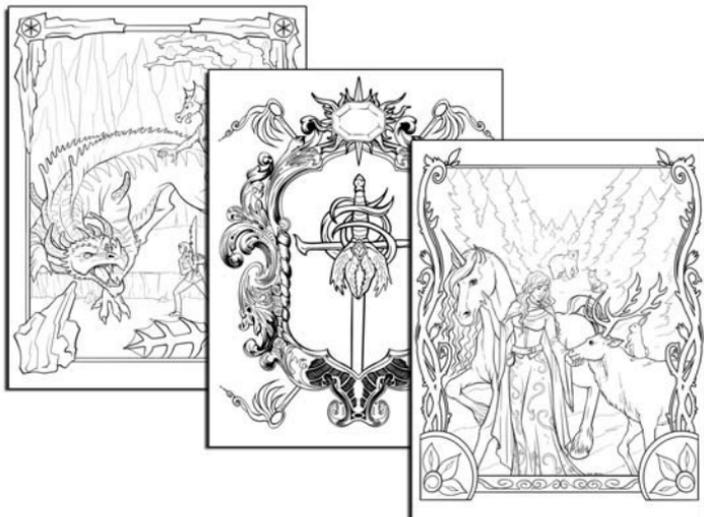
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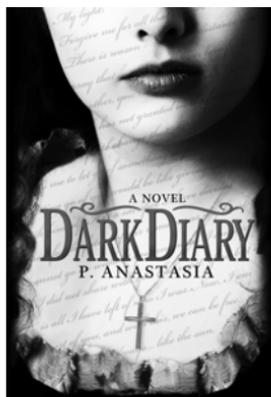
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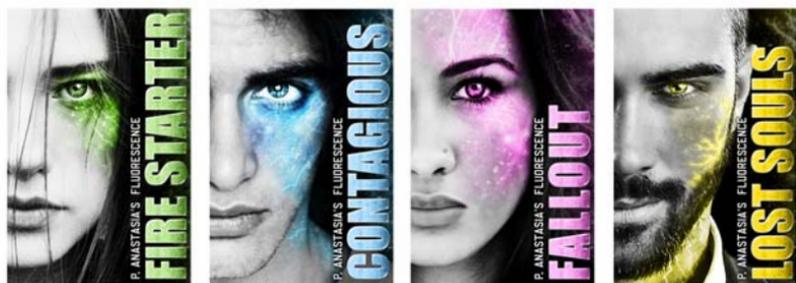
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Drawn to the craft in childhood, she began attempting to produce her first book at age 11. While working toward her college degree, she wrote news and editorial columns for two campus newspapers. After graduating with a degree in Communications and spending a year studying abroad in Kofu, Japan, she followed her heart to her publishing aspirations. She currently resides in the beautiful, green state of Kentucky with her husband and her ever-inspiring fur-babies. On the side, she serves as a professional voice talent for radio, television, and audio books.

P. Anastasia is also the author of the *Fluorescence* series and the historical-paranormal romance, *Dark Diary*.