

Birds of Paradise by Veronica Sloane

Chapter One: Promises

“Promise me that you’ll spread my ashes in the gardens. I want my death to mean something.” Stefania’s sweaty grip tightened around my hands as she stared up at me, perched beside her on the edge of the bed.

It was hard to look at my best friend like this— black cherry hair slicked and matted to her head, face the deepest shade of red—but I refused to look away. “Your death already means something, but of course. I promise.”

She let go of my hands to link her pinky through mine, “Now you can’t break it.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” I leaned over and kissed my thumb as she kissed hers, and we touched the two together, solidifying the pact. “This year’s flower harvest is going to be the most beautiful.” I instantly regretted my words.

I cringed as she whispered, “I wish I could be there to see it.”

A tear slid from her eye and she quickly tried to swipe it away before I could see it, but I didn’t miss it.

“You don’t have to be brave for me Stef,” I reached over to the tissue box on the nightstand and handed it to her.

“Kind of silly to have such a flammable item like this in a room with a girl about to Combust.”

I chuckled in response. Our shared sense of dark humor was something that bonded us over the years. We had been friends since birth and with our mothers being so close we grew up like sisters. Stefania had been there for me when my mother had succumbed to her own

Combustion, and I wouldn't be anywhere else but by her side while she experienced hers. Even if that meant watching my favorite person deteriorate before my very eyes.

"Speaking of flammable objects," I started, getting up from the bed, "I brought you something."

I fished my favorite fantasy novel out of my bag and placed it in her lap before sitting back down on the edge of the bed. Her eyes lit up, "Is that *Empress of Dawn*? I never thought you'd part with it."

"There are a lot of things I haven't wanted to part with. This is the easiest. Plus, I have an extra copy at home." I shrugged off what I had said, not wanting to upset her more. "I can't have you bursting into flames before we talk about my favorite book."

There was the dark humor again, and it seemed to work, "Please, I could probably tell you everything that happens and I've never even made it past the cover. You talk about it so much, Helia."

"It's just that good. Read it and you'll understand. The main character Meilani is so inspiring. The way she built that rebellion from nothing and became Empress of her kingdom is too good." I gushed.

"Hey, spoilers!" Stef feigned shock.

"Weren't you the one just saying you already know everything that happens?" I wagged my eyebrows at her.

We laughed and for a moment it felt like everything was okay. For a moment I could pretend that things were normal and I wasn't going to lose my best friend at any second. But these moments never lasted very long. The weight of our current situation was too heavy to ignore. As I looked at Stefania's pale face, the bags under her eyes, I couldn't help but be

reminded of the way my mom looked before she had Combust: just as sickly and helpless. A swell of power brewed in my chest as it reacted to the anxiety and sadness tugging at my heart, but I had to be careful. Strong emotions were dangerous. In for four, hold for four, out for 5, 6, 7, 8. My eyes were closed as I did my breathing exercise and felt a clammy hand grab at mine.

“I’m sorry.” Stefania’s words were hushed.

My eyes snapped open, “Why are you apologizing to me, Steffy?”

“I know how much this reminds you of your mother.” She wasn’t actually telepathic, but sometimes she knew me better than I knew myself. “You don’t have to be here all the time if it hurts this much.”

“Don’t be silly. I wouldn’t be anywhere else.” I meant it. I felt useless anywhere else.

“I didn’t expect a different answer, but I do hope that one of these days you’ll start living your own life.” Her grip tightened as she reached to hold my other hand too.

“You are part of my life, and right now my life is to be here supporting you.” I stared into her green eyes, hoping she would understand just how important she was to me.

“My life is limited, you still have yours left.” She sighed.

“For now. We don’t know when Combustion is going to finally catch up to me.” The truth of my own looming mortality was hard to avoid, as unknown as it was.

“I think we both know that you’re going to figure out how to make that not happen. You’re far too stubborn to die at the hands of your own suppressed powers.”

The heat in my chest rose again, “If any of the elders would help me, I might. What good is it being the granddaughter of the Hierophant if even she wants to sit idly by and do nothing?”

“You know as the leader of the Fira she has a lot of things to consider. Nan isn’t doing nothing, she’s just trying to be careful. I’m sure if someone comes up with an actual plan she’d

be happy to hear them out.” She nudged me at her last sentence. Stefania was always my voice of reason. What was I going to do without her?

“I don’t think there’s much merit in arguing with you right now, is there?”

“Nope, especially because you know I’m right.” She smirked at me and it was nice to see light in her sunken eyes.

Stefania had been mostly positive since she first started showing signs of Combustion. As the fevers set in and we knew of her fate, she was quick to accept it. She didn’t see the point in fighting a losing battle. Sometimes it felt like she supported me more than I did her, but I would never stop showing up.

The clock on the wall read 7 pm and I spoke up, “As much as I would love to sit here and tell you how right you always are, I should probably get Nan home. It’s already pretty late for dinner.”

“Get home safe.” Stefania squeezed my hands one last time.

I leaned over and kissed her burning forehead, “See you tomorrow, Stef. Love you.”

“Love you too, Helia.”

As soon as I closed the door behind me, I slumped against it. Out of her sight, I let the tears fall freely from my eyes. The reprieve of emotions loosened the power that had grown inside of me. Crying was almost as much of a release as actually getting to use my magic abilities. Once I finally got myself under control I walked over to the Granier’s family room. Nan was sitting on the couch with Stefania’s mom Lyra. They were too engrossed in their conversation to notice that I entered the room.

“It’s not fair. It should be me.” Lyra whimpered, elbows on her knees and face in her hands. Her dark red hair that matched Stefania’s fell messily over her shoulders and down the sides of her face, concealing what her hands didn’t cover.

Nan reached over to rub soothing circles on her back, “None of this is fair. The day we lost Aleka to Combustion was the worst day of my life. There’s not a day I don’t wish I could’ve gone back and traded places with her. I can’t promise the following days will be easy, because they won’t. But I can promise that you won’t be alone.”

“You’ll have us.” I finally chimed in from my spot in the entryway,

Both of their heads shot up in sync. My heart was already cracked, but the look on Lyra’s tear-streaked face completely shattered it. Nan smiled sympathetically at me as she continued to console her friend.

“How is she doing?” Nan asked.

“I think she’s doing better than the three of us combined.” I hoped that would make Lyra feel even the slightest bit better.

She forced a smile at me that didn’t meet her amber eyes, “Thank you for being there for her. I know it means a lot to Stef that you visit so often.”

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.” The only alternative would be to sit at home with my feelings, finding some menial chore to take my mind off of things, which never really worked.

Lyra nodded in answer and I walked over to sit on her right. I placed my hand on her back to take over for Nan. As I rubbed her back I stilled my mind and focused on drawing a dull heat to the palm of my hand. Her tense shoulders began to loosen as she allowed her body to slump into the couch. I focused harder until I could feel the grief and anxiety she was

experiencing. I worked with and against it to get it to loosen like Lyra's muscles. I couldn't change her emotions, only damper or heighten ones that already existed, but if I could alleviate any of Lyra's pain it was worth it. When I first began to develop my powers, it was shortly after my mom passed. Emotional manipulation was the first ability I was drawn to; it's also the safest for me to use. It was an ability that was very hard to detect, and it helped me expel the overwhelming amount of magic that had been collecting in my stores for 14 years. There was only so much time before my stores reached capacity and I too would be met by Combustion. The Fira elders weren't even sure if these little acts of magic would be enough to delay what seemed to be inevitable.

"Thank you," Lyra breathed out, shaking out of my touch and standing to stretch, "You have the same touch as your mother."

"Looks just like her too." Nan commented, looking over at me lovingly.

I was often compared to my mother. My fiery orange hair had the same wild curls that hers did and freckles decorated my face in the same way as hers, all over it. We shared the same hazel eyes and plump lips. My button nose didn't match hers, but I can only assume it came from the father I've never met. Our similarities didn't end there as people often commented that I got my strong will from Aleka DeGralla.

Lyra bent over to collect empty tea cups from the coffee table and I reached over to help, "Please don't worry about that. You two have done enough. Thank you both, really."

I took the cups from her hands anyways and my grandmother stood as well and pulled Lyra into a warm embrace, "You needn't thank us. We know you'd do the same. You *have* done the same."

The two let go of each other and Nan gathered her things for us to go. We said our goodbyes and Nan and I promised to return the next morning. I stopped in the kitchen to leave the teacups in the sink and met Nan by the front door. As we stepped outside of the Granier's home, a crisp winter breeze attacked our faces. My fingers twitched as heat instinctively moved to them. I reached for Nan's hand and she sharply pulled back.

"Not here Lia, it's not safe."

"Who is going to see?" I questioned.

"It's not worth the risk, my sun. We can never be too careful." She reached for my now cool hand but I ripped it away.

"I doubt the Iron Pyre's spies will be able to sense that I'm warming our hands."

"Like I said, it's not worth the risk." Her voice had a bit more bite since she didn't like being challenged. The strong will spanned three generations.

"What about the risk of me completely burning from the inside out?" My voice raised slightly.

Nan took a deep breath and reached for my hand again. This time I didn't pull away as she gave it a squeeze, "Then we do what we always do, and use our magic where it is safe."

I once again loosened out of her grip, "*We* aren't doing anything. I'm the one with magic. The magic that could potentially kill me if I don't use it. What I don't understand is why when we finally got it back, we didn't use it to free ourselves." My grandmother shushed me but I wasn't having it and I continued, "Seriously, Nan. You keep saying 'they're watching' and it's 'not safe' but we're the ones with the ability to burn them to a crisp."

"Helia!" It was Nan's turn to raise her voice, "The Fira have never used their magic to harm, and we're not going to start now."

“Well maybe we should.” I threw my hands up in exasperation, “The Iron Pyre put us in this situation in the first place. Stole our magic and now that we’ve stolen some of it back, we should use it to get the rest. They’re just stupid humans, what are they going to do about it?”

“Leave this talk to the elders. Don’t worry yourself with it.” She began to walk down the path to get to the street.

I followed after her, “You don’t want me to worry about the thing that keeps our people oppressed and in hiding? The thing that I’ve watched take the people I love? The thing that is going to take me one day?” My voice was growing ragged as the fire made its way up my throat trying to escape.

Nan whipped her head to look at me, “Lower your voice Lia. Anyone could be listening.” I scoffed and she continued as she walked back towards me, “Of course I expect you to worry about those things, but you needn’t concern yourself with fixing them.”

“Why not? Why can’t I help?” It came out more like a plea.

“Because you’re just a kid, sun.” Her face softened.

It took all the self control I’ve worked on over the years to not let the fire out, “I’m not a kid anymore and unlike you I actually have powers that could make a difference.”

“I know you’re mad Helia, but you don’t get to disrespect me.”

“Says the woman trying to stifle my powers.”

“I’m just trying to protect you.”

“You tried to protect mom and look what happened to her. Mom wanted to fight. It’s why she died, and you know it. It wasn’t suppressing her powers that ate her up inside, it was doing nothing while we had the chance to fight for everything.”

Nan was speechless as we reached the center of the barren community garden. Somewhere during our fight we had wandered in here. It was a short walk from the Granier's house, so it was no surprise we ended up here without noticing. There were only a few Birds of Paradise still standing. The orange and blue blooms highlighted by the lantern lights, shining bright against the harsh grey of the evening sky. The late fall harvest had passed and the few remaining flowers, wouldn't survive much longer, the deeper into winter we got. I stopped walking to pick one, knowing Stefania would perk up at the blue and orange flower. They were her favorite part of our culture and rituals. Nan stood by silently as I collected the bloom with careful respect.

As I stood up from my crouching position there was a loud noise that sounded like a small explosion, followed by a slight tremor in the ground. Nan and I snapped our heads toward each other and she nodded at me in confirmation. I broke out into a run, back the way I came, leaving Nan to trail behind me. My unruly hair whipped behind me as I let my feet carry me as fast as they could. In minutes I was rushing up the steps of my best friend's home. I burst through the front door and was met with Lyra walking out of the back hallway, looking at me gravely. She stopped as I walked closer, and her lips started to move but I didn't hear a thing they were saying. The only thing I could hear was the crackling ember reverberating inside me. I swiftly moved around her and hurried down the hallway to the last door on the left. The metal of the door knob melted in my hand as I twisted it and pushed it open.

After the first few Combustions, we figured a few things out. One important thing being, fireproofing the rooms where the afflicted would stay. Stefania's pale blue walls were still intact, but they were singed and covered with grey waves from where the flames had hit them, covering the brightness my friend desired. She had originally wanted them to be the deep blue of the Bird

of Paradise, but Lyra thought that would be too harsh of a color for a bedroom wall. So when they renovated the room, Stefania settled on the light blue. She said it reminded her of a hopeful morning sky. The furniture on the far side of the room survived, but the nightstand was gone. And the bed— The bed was just a husk of metal: the mattress gone, and the frame mangled. Sprinkled all over it, and on the floor, was the ash of the person I needed most right now.

I numbly approached the silken gray of cooling soot and fell to my knees. I laid the flower still in my hand upon it, and bowed my head to say my goodbyes.

“I promise your death is going to mean something.”

Chapter Two: Numb

The sunset taunted me. I saw flames in the orange that kissed the navy blue blanketing over the sky. Just another reminder of fiery endings. I couldn't outrun the sky, but I sure could avoid walking through the flower garden on the way home. Yet, my detour through the town square was more of a mistake than I had calculated. Unfortunately for me, dusk was when the town square came alive with the likes of the Night Market. Vendors were setting up their booths. Customers were waiting patiently to spend their money. I wanted to become invisible. I was a live wire, ready to detonate, and I was using every vestige of my focus to dampen my powers that wanted to scream out with my pain. One more, "are you okay, honey?" and I would burst. Or at least, my eyes were going to.

I hadn't cried yet, at least not since...

When I walked out of Stefania's destroyed room, Nan was holding a distraught Lyra in her arms on the couch. It was a very similar scene to just a couple of hours ago, only now my best friend no longer existed. The thought squeezed at my heart, but still no tears. I snuck out, not saying anything to either woman, they were both too wrapped up to notice my departure anyways. I wanted to avoid the death-filled garden, but the town square bursting with life felt like a sick joke. At least most people were too preoccupied with their own business to notice I was there. Being the granddaughter of the Hierophant garnered me some attention most of the time, but without her presence attached to me I usually can more easily hide in the shadows and slip between the cracks. The excitement of the market opening pushed my presence to the background. Shop owners were setting up their tables, laying out their products, and making sure they were ready for the steady crowd. Kids were running around to find their

favorite trinket and bakery stalls. One bumped into me on their way across my path, causing me to trip on the cobblestone and fall back onto the patch of grass behind me.

“Sorry Miss.” A little girl that barely reached my belly button, looked up at me through messy dark red curls, “Oh my gosh, Miss. Degralla, I am so so sorry.”

I reached down to tousle her unruly hair, “It’s okay, Caedi. It was just an accident. Just try to be careful, okay? Mr. Rito’s muffins aren’t going anywhere.”

Her toothless grin lightened the weight on my chest ever so slightly, allowing me to smile back at her. She ran off after a quick thank you and I followed her path through the throngs of people. Caedi’s purple plastic sandals disappeared into the crowd soon enough, and I was back to being left alone with my suffocating thoughts in the large crowd of people.

It was hard to see so many faces filled with joy. Most of the ones around me were. The only frustrated faces were merchants struggling to get their tables set up fast enough, or getting annoyed at customers trying to haggle way too low. I was just about to make it across the square when a glittering orange caught my eye. On a table full of pottery, was the most beautiful phoenix mug I had ever seen. I walked over and picked it up to get a closer look. I was amazed by the artistry. The ceramic had a texture that mimicked a feather pattern and the handle was formed into a neck, the head of the fire beast facing towards the cup. The blending of oranges, yellows, and reds made it appear as if it were actually ablaze.

“That one’s my favorite too.” Daphne, our village’s well-regarded potter, broke me from my reverie. I hadn’t even noticed that she had walked over to me, “It’s yours if you’d like.”

“How much?” I asked, putting the ware back on the table and reaching for my bag.

“Think of it as a gift.” She winked at me.

“Oh, I couldn’t just take it. You clearly worked very hard on this.” I insisted.

She picked the mug off the table and began to wrap it in paper, “It’s the least I can do. I see the way you support families going through Combustion. It doesn’t go unnoticed. You work hard for this village every day. You’re just like your mother that way.”

I smiled at her compliment, “She would’ve loved this mug.”

“The Resurgence may not have brought our phoenix form back, but I swore every time I saw her that she was going to will her wings back with sheer determination. I see that same spark in you.” Daphne and my mom were friends growing up. Her comment meant a lot but it was hard to share the sentiment with her.

“It feels like it’s dwindling.” I sighed, reminded of the reality of what happened mere minutes ago.

“But we’re not going to let it go out.” Nan’s compassionate voice startled me as she rested her hands on my shoulders.

I looked back and the upturned edges of her mouth didn’t match her tear filled eyes.

Daphne bowed her head in respect, “Heiro Degralla, it’s good to see you tonight. How are you?”

“I wish I could say I was better. News isn’t out yet, but Stefania didn’t make it.” The arm that now wrapped around my shoulders gave me another squeeze.

Daphne quickly snapped up her jaw that had dropped in shock, “I am so sorry for your loss. Lyra must be devastated. Hel, how are you even out here?”

“I didn’t want to go home through the flowers.”

That was the only answer she needed. An uncomfortable silence suffocated the pottery booth, despite that cheerful clamor around us. Daphne finished wrapping the mug and handed it over to me. The body movement shifted her jacket to the side, revealing a gold pin attached to

her shirt, right above her heart. I only quickly peaked at the design— a phoenix flying over a sun—before Daphne readjusted her jacket.

“That’s a beautiful brooch.” I mentioned, as I took the bag from her outstretched hand.

“Yes, quite beautiful.” Nan agreed, a suspicious look on her face.

Daphne shifted her weight from one foot to the other and nervously chuckled, “Oh yeah, that. Thanks.”

She didn’t move to show us the pin, and it seemed like she was seriously worried, but I wasn’t sure about what. I also wasn’t a fan of the way Nan was looking at her. It was almost like she was disappointed in her. Nan hadn’t looked at me like that since the last time I accidentally burned her favorite hand towels. Wanting to relieve Daphne from my grandmother’s judgemental gaze I grabbed Nan’s hand to tug her away.

“Bye Daph, thanks again for the mug.” I faked a smile for her benefit.

I could see the appreciation in her expression, “You’re so welcome, hun. I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon. Goodnight Nan, pleasure seeing you as always.”

Despite my grandmother’s important role as the leader of our people, she was Nan to everyone. The village of Igni was like one big family, and Nan was grandmother, mother, sister, aunt, and friend to everyone here. The previous scowl she wore had transformed back to its typical friendly demeanor as she bid Daphne farewell.

“What was that back there?” I asked once we were a safe distance from the bustling town center.

“What was what, sun?” Nan asked innocently.

I squinted at her and decided to drop it. The rest of our walk was silent. My thoughts were running wild, going from one bad memory to the next. I didn’t often think about the day I

lost my mom. Seeing the aftermath of Stefania's combustion forced the memory of my mother's to the forefront of my mind. I didn't have many memories of her. I've been told countless stories about my mom over the years, but I was six when the sickness gave way and the flames finally took her. That memory was crystal clear.

We hadn't seen it coming. My mother was no longer the only person in the village suffering from the symptoms leading up to Combustion, but no one else had yet succumbed to its viciousness. There was nothing to prepare for because at that point we hadn't known what to expect. We had been sitting out in our personal garden when Aleka Degralla inhaled her last breath and exhaled flames. Nan couldn't have shielded me from the horror if she wanted to, as she was paralyzed by her own shock and grief. When the moment finally came I was left to watch as fire erupted out of my mom and engulfed her completely. It was Marco, a local farmer and husband to our neighbor Matilde, who had saved me from seeing what happened next. He saw the fire while he was attending to his yard and swiftly jumped over the fence to rescue me. My neighbor scooped me up in his arms and held me close as I sobbed into his chest. I didn't watch as the ashes fell. I didn't wait with bated breath with Nan, Marco, and the rest of the neighbors that had accumulated in our yard.

The Fira had lost hope a long time ago that we would ever touch the sky again. A phoenix had not been reborn from the ash since The Iron Pyre succeeded in their collective's goal of banishing our powers over 60 years ago. Whether it was fear or envy that drove the humans' desire to quell our magic, it was at the hands of our own that we lost everything. The Fira don't blame Eirene Degralla. As Hierophant, it was her job to protect our people and uphold our traditions. We were taught very young that she was a strong leader who always put her people first. She believed she was sacrificing her powers to save us all when in fact she was

relinquishing the spark that lived in us all. The humans had tricked her, taking Eirene's life and all of our fiery abilities and immortality along with it.

Then the Resurgence happened, and it reignited a hope that rose like our phoenix ancestors from the ashes of despair. We didn't regain all of our abilities. I would never know the difference, but I was told we were a quarter of the strength that we could be. And on that day in my backyard, as my mother Combusted, we waited to see if the Fira would be phoenix again. Our already heavy grief was tinged with disappointment when the ash settled. There was a part of me that was stupidly hoping that I would find a phoenix in the wreckage of Stefania's room.

Once Nan and I finally returned home, I immediately ran off to my room to put my mug in a safe place. I placed it on the floating shelf beside my bed. It seemed to fit perfectly in between the painting of my mom and the illustrated books about Fira history. I moved my miniature glass phoenix figurine closer to the mug. Despite neither of us ever experiencing our phoenix form, I felt that they still connected my mother and I through the veil.

With that taken care of, I stalked into the kitchen to help Nan prepare us a late dinner. I wasn't sure if I would be able to eat, but I imagined her stomach must be as empty as mine was. She was already one step ahead of me and was at work chopping meat and vegetables when I walked into Nan's favorite room in the house. I joined her side in front of the stove and reached towards a burner. Palm facing up, a flame flickered above it. I twisted it downward and ignited the stove. I placed a pan on top of it, before it could grow out of control and add oil to the pan.

"You're getting very controlled with your powers, sun." Nan commended from the counter beside me.

"If only I actually got to use them." I didn't try to hide the snark in my voice.

"You get to use them here, you know why you can't use them anywhere else."

“Honestly, I don’t. You keep saying ‘they’re watching’ and it’s ‘not safe’ but we’re the ones with the ability to burn them to a crisp.” I didn’t understand why we hadn’t started fighting back years ago.

“Helia! The Fira have never used their magic to harm, and we’re not going to start now.” Nan scolded.

“So instead we’re just going to sit idly by while the same curse that stole our magic is killing our own people?” The fire that was a constant dull ache in my chest began to flicker to life.

“Leave this talk to the elders. Don’t worry yourself with it.” I hated when she dismissed my concerns.

“You don’t want me to worry about the thing that keeps our people oppressed and in hiding? The thing that I’ve watched take people I love? The thing that is going to take me one day? I just watched the aftermath of what it did to my best friend and I don’t want to sit idly by to experience the same fate.” My voice was growing ragged as the fire made its way up my throat, trying to escape.

“Of course I expect you to worry about those things, but you needn’t concern yourself with fixing them. Stefania’s death is tragic and I know you’re grieving, but we cannot act irrationally.”

“Irrationally? What’s irrational is doing nothing. Please tell me what you’re doing to fix things.”

“I know you’re mad, Helia, but you don’t get to disrespect me in my own household.”

“Says the woman trying to stifle me in mine.”

“I’m just trying to protect you.”

“Maybe you should start believing in me instead, believing in all of your people. We’re not powerless anymore just because you still are.” At that moment I didn’t care if I would regret what I was saying. I was faced with two options: let the fire building inside me out, or get the feelings out with words. The latter seemed smarter for my rare book collection. “Mom wanted to fight. It’s why she died, and you know it. It wasn’t suppressing her powers that ate her up inside, it was doing nothing while we had the chance to fight for everything.”

I didn’t let Nan get another word out. I stalked out of the room, out of the house. I needed to clear my head before I really said something I couldn’t take back. The worn path behind my house had permanent footprints in the dying grass and mud where I’d let off steam so many times before. Turning right on the path that would take me to my favorite thinking spot, I took off with a sprint towards Morpho lake.