

Chapter 0 : Not All Birds Are Free



Leandra walks through the breezy silk grass covering most of her planet, Yanna. She carries an eavesflapper bird tightly in her hands without hurting it. The eavesflapper flutters its wings, feeling anxious, anticipating what shall become of it.

Regardless of this, the bird still trusts Leandra's hands, remembering she took care of it after it broke its wings many months ago. Leandra approaches the pebbled pathway leading to the pillared gust temple atop the tallest hill within sight of the palace. Inside the temple, she looks around and sees that everything is still intact and untouched, just as she thought it would be. The temple, made of stone and decorated with silk, howls lightly as the wind blows through the large openings on both sides of Leandra.

Still holding the bird tightly, Leandra walks to the end of the rectangular gust temple and looks up as the sky above reveals itself. She opens her hands and lifts them, releasing the bird into the air. Crying in delight, the eavesflapper flaps its wings, taking the gust with it as it leaves through the sky window.



“I will cherish the time you gave to me to be with you,” Leandra says. She looks up and watches the birds far above as the eavesflapper joins them and disappears into the dark blue sky. She wonders if she did the right thing and if the bird will have a better chance living without her mending its ailments. The thought quickly passes. She realizes the giving has been completed, and she couldn’t turn back the wheels of time even if she wanted to.

“I trust that you will accomplish everything you came here for. You can take care of yourself, beautiful creature,” Leandra says to herself in a subtle, soft voice.

Leandra continues to stare up into the sky long after the birds have passed. She uses this rare opportunity of being alone to weigh the future

of her people and consider the paths forward. After some time, Leandra turns around and is startled to see one of her advisers behind her.

“Klonn, I wasn’t expecting you,” Leandra says to her adviser.

“I’ve only come to let you know that your lunch is ready,” Klonn tells her.

“Thank you, Klonn. I appreciate it. I will meet you back at the palace,” Leandra says with slight impatience. She watches as Klonn bows, then leaves the temple in a vehicle and heads back toward the palace. *It’s not like him to come to the temple while I am here. He knows this is one of the few times I do not want to be disturbed.*

Leandra starts to walk out of the temple when she notices a shooting star strike across the sky above her. She feels an unfamiliar energy move through her body, then looks up to see many other shooting stars dart through the atmosphere. *What is this?* She moves quickly out of the temple and looks up as the sky suddenly darkens, clouds swelling overhead. *This cannot be happening.* She feels a flash of memories run through her mind, seeing only brief images from her childhood on an enslaved planet.

Leandra lifts her hand toward the sky, and a gust of wind blows away the dark clouds. As they dissipate, she sees another shooting star move through the sky and fall toward the ground not far behind her. She turns to investigate the anomaly but can at first see only a shadowy shape taking form. *Are the shields not up? How could this be happening?* The unknown figure continues to form, and Leandra can see it’s a living being slowly walking toward her.

“Those winds,” the shadowy figure says. She moves closer toward Leandra. Immediately recognizing the woman’s voice, Leandra stances herself, ready for battle. The shadow lifts from the woman, and Leandra confirms what she thought to herself.



“Cogwa,” Leandra says, loud enough for the woman to hear, shock in her voice.

“You couldn’t bring yourself to completely shut me out, could you?” Cogwa asks in a condescending tone.

“Come here!” Cogwa yells. She flies toward Leandra with her hands sprawled in front of her. Leandra glides to the side, barely missing Cogwa’s claws.

“I don’t want to fight you, Cogwa,” Leandra states. A yellow aura glows off her body.

“No, you’d rather banish me,” Cogwa shouts. She flies forward several times, attempting to swipe at Leandra with her claws. Leandra moves as quickly as the wind, dodging each attack. She lands on both feet, then

blows Cogwa back with a powerful gust of wind. Cogwa is sent flying far from Leandra toward the capital city, steadying herself as she floats in the air.

“I am counting on that!” Cogwa yells. She looks over Leandra’s shoulder at the capital city behind her.

“Cogwa, no!” Leandra shouts. She runs as quickly as the winds will take her toward Cogwa and the capital city. She feels a sense of regret that she left Cogwa with a key to pass through the planetary shields, knowing she could return hostile. *The throne room!* Leandra thinks, remembering that Cogwa can still access it. *I’ve hoped for so long that Cogwa would return, but not like this!*

“Klonn!” Leandra yells. She taps the communicator on her wrist, signaling her adviser. “Can you hear me?” she says louder, hoping to get a response. *He was just here earlier. Why isn’t he responding?*

Leandra arrives at the entrance of the capital city, hearing screaming not far ahead.



“Please help us!” a woman screams as she runs toward Leandra. “Empress!” The woman takes a few steps, then falls to the ground unconscious.

Leandra touches the side of the woman’s neck to ensure she still has a pulse. She notices a pollen-like substance covering the woman’s face. *Cogwa’s doing, I assume. Where are the guards?*

“Guards!” Leandra yells, looking around for a response. An eerie silence answers her as more people fall to the ground. She uses the wind to glide through the city toward the throne room, noticing her people, including the guards, passed out along the way.

As Leandra moves through the city, she continues to think about Cogwa, wondering why she has returned after so many years. She lowers herself to the ground upon reaching the towering throne room. She looks around

to see more guards and several advisers asleep. After passing through the main corridors, Leandra finally arrives at the throne room doors. She notices they don't open immediately, as they normally would.



Leandra shakes her head in disbelief, then finds a control panel hidden behind a rock near the lower right side of the door. She pulls it open and places her hand on the panel, hoping it will read her signature. A single beep sounds, indicating that her signal has been denied entry.

“Damn!” Leandra shouts. She lowers the panel to the ground and looks around the corridor, searching for familiar faces. She spots one of the security guards, Mintelle.

“Mintelle,” Leandra says. She gently shakes the guard to wake him, but he does not respond. She notices the same pollen-like substance covering his face. Leandra stands and holds out her hands, summoning a gust of wind that blows the pollen away from his body.

“Uh...” Mintelle murmurs. He shakes his head as he awakens.

“Guardsmen,” Leandra says respectfully. She kneels and supports his back with her hand, holding him upright.

“Empress,” Mintelle says in a weary voice. “A strange woman with wings flew through here. Our weapons seem to just absorb into her, like what we’ve seen happen with you.” He slowly rises to his feet, steadying himself on Leandra’s shoulder.

“I know who she is,” Leandra says. “This is something I should have taken care of a long time ago.” She lowers her head for a moment, knowing she left this part of her life unfinished and fragmented.

“Mintelle,” Leandra says as she grasps Mintelle’s shoulder. “I need to find a way into the throne room, but Cogwa must have found a way to lock me out. I wonder if she’s threatened Klonn and forced him to lock me out of here.”

“Yes, Empress,” Mintelle says. “I work security through every corridor of this palace, and one of my crewmen found something that might be of importance. Please come with me.” Mintelle chauffeurs Leandra through the castle into a narrow passageway, where on the other side is a room Leandra doesn’t recognize. A large archway with a door beneath it stands in front of them. The archway is covered in gems and jewels that light up the room.

“Hundreds of years have passed. How could I not have known about this room?” Leandra asks.

“We only discovered it recently,” Mintelle responds. “The two walls seem to have opened on their own, revealing the passageway into this room. But if my palace schematics are correct, the other side of this wall should lead to the throne room.”

“Great work, guardsman,” Leandra says. She lightly taps Mintelle on the shoulder in gratitude. “Now, how do we open this? I don’t see any handles

or contraptions. Only these crystals in the archway.” She lays her hand on the colorful crystals, and they light up, illuminating the room. She keeps her hand on the crystals while covering her eyes with the other. A beam of light covers the doorway and emits a humming noise.

“Empress?” Mintelle asks. He covers his eyes with his arm.

“You’ve done great work,” Leandra states. “This is a portal. Watch over the castle for me while I’m there. If I don’t return, you are to lead the security forces and take back the castle by force.”

“Understood, Empress!” Mintelle yells back.

Leandra walks through the portal of light and appears in her throne room. She looks around and sees her advisers scattered across the floor, appearing to be asleep. She notices the same pollen-like substance she has seen before covering their faces. Up ahead, she sees Cogwa at the main control panel, working hastily.

“I see all of my advisers here, asleep on the ground,” Leandra says. “All of them but one.” Cogwa turns around with an angry scowl.

“I only needed one,” Cogwa says. She continues working at the main control panel.

“You didn’t need any of them, Cogwa,” Leandra states. “You know I left the shield key unlocked for you. You could have returned home at any time. But why now? Why like this?”

“Ha.” Cogwa attempts a laugh but quickly returns to her scowl. She continues working on the control panel, tapping buttons. “Klonn!”

“Yes, my dear,” Klonn says from above. He slams to the ground in front of Leandra.

“I don’t have time for this, and I’ve never cared for reunions,” Cogwa says. “Get her out of my way. I think I’m almost there.”

“Of course, my dear,” Klonn replies. He locks his eyes onto Leandra.

“Klonn,” Leandra says hesitantly. “You know you are no match for me.” Her aura shines bright green. “How could you have done this, Klonn? Stand down.”

Leandra takes a few steps back as Klonn transforms into a large monster with huge claws protruding from his hands.

“Klonn,” Leandra says, disappointment in her voice.

In his new form, Klonn swipes at Leandra with his gigantic claws. Leandra twirls through the air between his strikes, dodging every attack.



“Stand down!” Leandra shouts. She shoots a gust of wind at Klonn, knocking him back. She moves at intense speed, driving her foot into Klonn’s face. He crashes to the ground, destroying several control panels, but quickly regains his footing. Leandra hears garbled noises coming from his mouth, nothing she can understand.

Leandra raises her hands, and a miniature tornado sweeps up Klonn and slams him into the roof. He falls face-first hundreds of feet to the

ground, creating a small crater in the floor. Leandra watches as Klonn's body slowly morphs back into its original form. She looks to Cogwa and notices she has stopped working at the control panel.

"You'll never stop Urvit," Cogwa says.

"Urvit?" Leandra asks. "Is that someone working with the Befallen? Where have you been all this time?" Cogwa looks away and back at the control panel. "You indoctrinated Klonn to work with you? To get you into the throne room? To take down the planetary shields? Why?"

"BEFALLEN!" Cogwa laughs. "Their minds are weak. But yours. You might be of use."

"You're deranged, Cogwa," Leandra says as she steps closer. "This isn't you." She looks at the control panel and notices a green notification. *She accessed the shield controls.* She sees Cogwa moving her hand toward the green symbol.

"Cogwa, no!" Leandra shouts. She raises her hand, and a gust of wind blasts Cogwa away from the panel, suspending her in place above Leandra. Cogwa's hands claw toward the controls, but the wind funnel keeps her trapped.

"I've lost you, again," Leandra says in a sullen tone. She turns her head away from Cogwa and walks to the control panel. She disables the shield shutdown program, making the green symbol disappear. Then she selects another program, opening the skyway doors above the throne room and revealing the sky. "Goodbye, Cogwa." Leandra lowers her head and thrusts her hand forward, sending Cogwa through the skyway doors and into space until she disappears from view. She slowly lowers her hand and looks back at the control panel.

Distraught, Leandra remembers when she first met and taught Cogwa. Born on another planet, Cogwa was left on her doorstep as a baby. Leandra took her in as her own, never knowing why or how she was abandoned at the palace doorstep. As Cogwa grew older, Leandra came to realize that she was also a guardian, tapping into her own innate powers. She remembers her joy at finding another guardian, tempered by caution after losing so many of her brethren, with whom she used to rule the planet.

She recalls training Cogwa and slowly regaining her trust in the universe. Darker memories surface of catching Cogwa communicating with what she believed to be the Befallen, and of Cogwa refusing to return to her senses. She remembers casting Cogwa into space before, just as she did moments ago. She had assumed then it was the Befallen's influence, but now she is no longer certain. *It must have been this force called Urvit that she mentioned.*

Leandra reawakens from her memories and disables Cogwa's signature from the shields, preventing her return. She opens the doors to the throne room and sees Mintelle waiting outside.

"Mintelle," Leandra says. Mintelle rushes toward her as other security forces join him.

"Empress!" Mintelle shouts. He climbs the steps to the control panel and places a hand on her back. "You're okay."

"I am, and thank you again for your help, Mintelle," Leandra says. "You helped save us all."

"Of course, Empress," Mintelle says.

Leandra takes a moment, attempting to figure out what's been happening. *I know that there is something bigger happening here. Cogwa must have been involved, and most likely just a decoy, to distract me from something. I sensed that those other shooting stars were entities too, probably headed somewhere important if they wanted to distract me.*

Leandra looks at her other advisors on the floor, their faces covered in a pollen-like substance. She extends her hands and summons winds to blow the pollen from their bodies. The advisors begin to wake up one by one, and Mintelle's security team moves in to ensure they're okay. She walks up to one of her advisors and helps her to her feet as she awakens.

"Leandra," the advisor says in a worried voice.

"Don't worry, Cellis," Leandra reassures her. "Cogwa is gone. I've banished her again and blocked her from ever returning."

"Empress," Cellis says, her expression sullen. "She was like a daughter to you. That must have been difficult."

Leandra tilts her head down, tears pooling in her eyes, then raises it

again. "It isn't easy. But I need you to hear me right now. There were others in the sky who passed by when Cogwa came to our planet. I need to find out where they went and stop this threat once and for all. Otherwise, Cogwa may return one day with an army."

"We can gather some of our troops to go with you," Cellis says.

"We could, but I am going to go alone," Leandra replies. "I should be back quickly. Whatever those energies were, flying across our sky, may be the ones controlling Cogwa. Maybe I can save her and stop this once and for all." Cellis looks at Leandra and slowly nods.

"We will watch over the people while you are gone, Leandra," Cellis says in a shaky voice. "We will be awaiting your return."

"I will come back, Cellis," Leandra says. She turns to everyone else in the room, her advisors and security team. "To all of you, I will return. I trust you can watch over this planet without me for a short while."

"Yes, Empress," the advisors and security team say in unison.

Leandra leaves the palace and heads back toward the tallest hill, where she visited the Wind Temple earlier. She looks at the Capitol City one last time, then looks up and disappears into the sky as a beam of light. She flies through space in her semi-ethereal form, glancing at the beautiful stars far off, light years away.

While flying, Leandra senses a powerful force coming from a large, uneven asteroid floating in space. *Why haven't my scouts seen this before?* She stops for a moment, then flies toward the asteroid to investigate. She finds a giant crater where the energy signal grows stronger. *I sense something familiar down there.* She moves closer and discovers an entrance to a gigantic, temple-like structure carved inside the asteroid itself.



Leandra lands inside the temple and discovers gravity and breathable air. She is startled by such an incredible find. *What a magnificent structure, way out here in the middle of space. How could we not have known about this place before?*

Leandra walks around inside the temple, where she finds carvings of people she doesn't recognize and symbols she's never seen before. *There are carvings of art from other worlds here, but why does this feel so familiar? I've never been here before. Or have I? Did the previous guardians on Yanna come here before? Is this them?* Leandra lightly touches the carvings on the walls, as though feeling their energies, then continues investigating.



In another room, she finds a large green crystal, in the middle, hovering slightly above the ground. For some reason, Leandra feels drawn to it, as though she can almost hear it speaking to her in her mind. She moves closer and touches the crystal. Instantly, foreign memories flood her mind, and she can hear and see nearly a thousand different things at once, unable to tell what is being said or shown. After a moment, she pulls her hand away and clears her head. Not realizing what has just happened, she continues through the temple.

Leandra finds many stone doorways with no apparent locks or openings, except for small crystal shards embedded along the sides. She touches the crystals in an attempt to open a path, but nothing happens, unlike with the large crystal she found earlier. She blows wind through the shards, and

the doorway slowly opens.

Leandra moves through every entry she can find, passing even more rooms and carvings of unfamiliar places. She arrives at a large chamber where she can't find a way forward. Ahead of her, she sees two shrouded figures in the darkness, hidden from the natural glow of the crystals lining the walls. One of the figures turns when it hears Leandra enter.

Leandra startles as a massive red creature with horns protruding from her head and hooves for feet turns to face her. The other figure remains in the shadows, indistinguishable. The shadowed figure walks away, deeper into the temple and out of sight, but before leaving, she says, "Inferno, take care of her."

Startled, Leandra readies herself for battle as the large red creature slowly turns fully toward her.



“Inferno?” Leandra asks suspiciously. “Is that who you are? I sensed you earlier passing over my planet. Where is Cogwa?”

Inferno holds out her hand, unresponsive to the questions. A ball of flame forms just above her fingertips. She doesn’t hesitate, launching the fireball directly at Leandra.

Leandra ducks and weaves away from the blast, continuing to dodge Inferno’s fireballs until one massive explosion knocks her off her feet.

“I don’t want to fight you!” Leandra yells. She summons a powerful gust of wind to push Inferno back. Inferno smiles, unmoved by the force. A large, fiery red sphere emanates from Inferno’s body until it engulfs the entire room.

Leandra falls to the ground, feeling her life force begin to slip away. *No.*

I must get up. She tries to move, but realizes she can't. As her energy fades, Inferno approaches and reaches out her hands. Just as Inferno is about to grasp Leandra's green life force, a spark lashes out and knocks her hand aside.

"What is this?" Inferno asks. She tries again, but the spark repels her once more.

Far below them, in another part of the temple, a powerful guardian in an iridescent robe decorated with stars waves her hands, summoning a field to protect Leandra's life force from being stolen.

Inferno attacks the barrier repeatedly, but even as Leandra's body fades and only her essence remains, she cannot break through.

"Continue along your journey," the guardian murmurs to herself. She casts a spell that sends Leandra's soul essence back onto its original path. Inferno watches in confusion as Leandra's life essence streaks out of the temple.

Inferno gives chase, flying through space in search of Leandra's energy, but it vanishes into the vastness beyond her reach. After a time, Inferno gives up, realizing Leandra is no longer within her grasp.