Chapter 117: An Empire of Fear pt.2

The yellow light behind the five warriors finally faded, leaving the rocky rise much as it had been before they arrived. None of them moved. Captain Lactarius stayed at the centre of the formation with his arms spread wide, and his companions held their poses for so long that Att-Lass began to wonder whether they meant to stay that way indefinitely. It took him several seconds to understand that they were waiting for something, and that something was probably applause.

The villagers seemed just as uncertain. A few began clapping hesitantly, only to stop when their neighbours turned to look at them. One elderly man lifted his hands as though he meant to join in, then thought better of it when no one followed his lead, and the silence that followed grew more uncomfortable by the second.

Att-Lass glanced at Revan, who was dangerously close to laughing. Then his ring spoke.

“Caution, Lantern. Yellow spectrum energy detected from five sources.”

Revan’s ring must have told him the same thing, because the laughter drained from his face at once. He looked up at the five figures on the rise, then turned his head slowly toward the distant cliff.

“Right,” Revan said under his breath as Att-Lass stepped forward.

“I am Att-Lass, a Green Lantern assigned to Sector 616. We came here on a peaceful mission, and I believe there has been some misunderstanding concerning our presence.”

Lactarius lowered his arms at last and let his cape settle behind him. His companions followed a moment later. “We know exactly what you are,” he said. “Do not insult us with introductions, Green Lantern. Your kind is neither welcome nor permitted within the territories of the Shi’ar Empire.”

Att-Lass frowned. He had expected suspicion, perhaps even hostility, but the captain spoke as though the Corps had committed some unforgivable crime against his people. “May I ask why?”

Lactarius looked genuinely astonished. “Why? You dare ask why?” He swept one arm across the settlement and addressed the whole gathering. “The Shi’ar have not forgotten the betrayal of the Green Lantern, who abandoned the trust we placed in him to become the consort of the Phoenix! His actions, together with those of that accursed creature, brought about the Great Divide of our people and plunged the Empire into the Dark Times.”

The Phoenix?

Att-Lass knew what it was, a primordial force older than most stars, but this was the first he had heard of any connection between it and the Guardian. He had certainly never heard an account that blamed Lord Ion for a catastrophe within the Shi’ar Empire.

“For centuries, our people suffered for that betrayal,” Lactarius continued, encouraged by the silence. “Our ancestors fought one another, our ancient traditions were profaned, and the Empire nearly fell into ruin. We remember who set those events in motion.” His golden eyes moved across the four recruits, and the yellow light around him flared. “And now, it seems, your kind has multiplied.”

The light rolled outward from the rise. Somewhere behind Att-Lass, a child began to cry, and an old man near the well sank slowly to his knees with his hands over his face. Carina’s ring hand trembled, and she pressed it against her side to make it stop. The effect of fear was unmistakable.

“Multiplied,” Tyron repeated, with a delicate shudder. “Like vermin. And look at the specimens they’ve chosen. A Kree and a Skrull, standing side by side as though such a thing were perfectly respectable. Has the universe simply run out of shame?”

Revan’s expression hardened, and Att-Lass felt the heat climb his own neck.

Crémont stepped forward and flexed, making the yellow and black fabric strain across his arms. “The Kree are a stain upon the universe!” he announced. “And the Skrulls are the same stain wearing a different colour!” He slapped the boulder beside him, and it burst into gravel.

Voutros turned to him with an appreciative smile. “Well said, Crémont. Very well said.”

“Thank you, my friend.” The Strontian flexed again, pleased with both the insult he had delivered and the compliment he had received.

Revan took a step forward, but Att-Lass caught his arm before he could take another. Revan turned on him with real anger in his eyes. Att-Lass understood it completely, and he was just as angry, but Instructor Velenor’s voice came back to him as clearly as if she were standing beside him, her ancient wisdom helping him maintain his composure.

“Not worth it,” Att-Lass murmured.

Revan held his gaze for a long moment, looking as though he wanted to argue. Then some of the tension left his shoulders, and Att-Lass let go.

Carina had already moved ahead of them with both hands raised to show she meant no harm.

“Please, there’s no need for any of this. We know who you are. You’re members of the Imperial Guard, and I understand why you’d be concerned about strangers appearing so close to your territory, but we didn’t come here to fight anyone.”

Lactarius watched her without expression, and she went on.

“On my world, people speak of the Shi’ar with gratitude. Your Empire freed entire populations from slavery and has done so much to destroy the slave trade. What you did means something to people like

me. I don't have anything against the Shi'ar Empire. None of us do. We came because these people needed help, and that creature was going to kill them. Surely you can understand that?"

For a moment, Att-Lass thought she had reached him. The captain looked at her thoughtfully, and his eyes moved from her face to the emblem on her chest. Whatever Att-Lass thought of the Empire's recent wars, he knew its campaigns against the Badoon had earned it real goodwill, and there was no doubting how much Carina meant every word.

He found himself hoping she would succeed. The Guardian had warned them about the yellow light on the journey here, and they had come looking for anyone who wielded it, but that had not been the only reason he had brought them. He also wanted to know whether the Shi'ar would treat the Green Lanterns as enemies, and whether Parallax's influence ran so deep that his own enmity toward Ion had become the Empire's enmity too.

Lactarius smiled. "How touching."

Carina's face fell.

"The Majestor freed you from slavery, and this is how you repay him? By clothing yourself in the colours of his enemy?" Lactarius shook his head with theatrical sorrow. "I am certain His Imperial Majesty would be moved to tears by such ingratitude."

"You don't understand," Carina said.

"Whatever you have to say is irrelevant." He turned away from her as though she had ceased to exist. "By decree of Majestor M'Turon, no bearer of the green light is permitted within the borders of the Shi'ar Empire, and no amount of sentimental pleading will persuade us to overlook it."

Well, I guess we're going to be enemies, then, Att-Lass thought grimly.

Att-Lass took a measured breath. "Captain, we have not entered Shi'ar territory."

"You stand upon Imperial soil."

"No, we don't," Revan said, having plainly run out of patience. "This planet is outside your recognised borders. It's an independent settlement in an unclaimed system."

Lactarius regarded him with faint amusement. "An interesting distinction." He gestured across the settlement and the plains beyond it. "Everything will be part of the Empire eventually."

"I am Groot." Twig had moved up behind the others, and a faint emerald glow had gathered around his hands.

Crémont squinted at him. "What did the tree say?"

“I believe,” Tyron said, studying Twig with sudden interest, “that the tree is threatening us.” He pressed a hand to his chest, delighted. “How adorable. Look at him, Captain! Such magnificent branches, and that lovely texture. I want him. May I have him when we’re finished? He would look marvellous in my quarters, right beside the window.”

“Focus, gentlemen!” Lactarius snapped. He looked the Lanterns over once more, from Att-Lass to Revan, then Carina, and finally Twig, before sighing with exaggerated disappointment. “Five against four. Hardly sporting, is it? The Special Forces do not humiliate themselves by fighting fair odds. We fight overwhelming odds, and we win them.”

“So we only send one!” Crémont declared, slamming his fist into his palm with a crack that echoed across the rise. “Send me, Captain! I’ll crush all four at once, and then I’ll crush them again to make sure they stay crushed!”

Voutros scoffed. “Please. By the time you finish your first flex, Crémont, I’ll have finished them and returned to Noctis.”

He vanished.

Carina felt a finger tap her shoulder. She spun around so fast she nearly fell, but there was nothing behind her except a frightened villager. When she turned back, Voutros was on the rise again, inspecting his nails as though he had never moved.

“See?”

None of the four had seen him move. Att-Lass felt something cold settle in his stomach.

“You both lack imagination,” Tyron said with a sniff. “Captain, I’m clearly the obvious choice. I’ll dispose of them with my usual elegance and bring back that delightful tree. Mostly in one piece, though some trimming may be necessary.”

“I am Groot!” Twig protested.

“See? He likes me already.”

Behind the others, Pegma raised one hand. Nobody noticed, so he stretched it higher and shifted from foot to foot until Lactarius finally looked his way.

“Yes, Pegma?”

“Captain, could I go? Just this once? I never get to fight anyone important.”

Crémont turned to him in disbelief. “You?”

“Absolutely not,” Voutros said. “Remember Bermar?”

“That wasn’t my fault! The building was already damaged!”

“You destroyed the wrong building.”

“They looked the same!”

Tyron sighed and laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “Darling, we all appreciate your enthusiasm, but perhaps leave this to someone with a little more experience.”

Pegma’s hand sank slowly back to his side.

“Actually,” Lactarius said, looking at the little Chr’yllite with fresh interest, “Pegma is the weakest of us, which is precisely why he may be the right choice. When their Corps finds what is left of them, I want it understood that it took only the least of the Special Forces.” He paused. “But the matter must be settled properly.”

Down on the plain, Att-Lass leaned towards Revan without taking his eyes off the rise. “Are they actually arguing about which one of them gets to kill us?”

“I think they are,” Revan said quietly. “I thought it was some elaborate insult at first. I’m not so sure anymore.”

“I am Groot,” Twig said, and his roots stirred uneasily in the soil.

Around them, the villagers had begun slipping away. Families gathered up their children and hurried between the houses towards the fields.

Att-Lass glanced towards the distant cliff. Ion was still there, still watching, and he had not offered a single instruction. Surely the Guardian could feel what they were facing. Att-Lass did not know whether they were meant to retreat or stand their ground. Perhaps this was the test. Perhaps the Guardian wanted to see what the yellow light could do against his Lanterns, and how much the impurity he had described would truly cost them in a real fight.

For a moment, a troubling thought crossed Att-Lass’s mind. What if they were merely test subjects, sent here to be sacrificed so the Guardian could observe the results? But that went against everything he had come to believe about Ion. His years of training in the Kree military, particularly his time in the Accuser Corps, had taught him to judge people and recognise their true nature. From everything he had seen of Ion, Att-Lass had come to regard him as a benevolent being, one who genuinely cared for those under his protection.

Then again, how much did he truly know about the Guardian? Perhaps he had misjudged him entirely. Before he could dwell on the thought any further, Lactarius spoke, drawing his attention back to the five warriors.

“Enough, gentlemen!” Lactarius called, and the argument ended at once. “We shall settle this as the Special Forces have always settled questions of the greatest importance. With honour, with tradition, and with absolute fairness! Crown, Talon, Feather!”

The other four gasped in genuine excitement and formed a tight circle around him, each of them holding out a fist.

“What are they doing now?” Att-Lass asked.

Revan narrowed his eyes. “I think they’re playing a game.”

“CROWN! TALON! FEATHER!” the five chanted together, and their hands snapped open.

Lactarius frowned at the result. “Three Talons, one Crown, one Feather. Inconclusive. Again!”

Carina stepped close to Att-Lass and Revan and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Now. We should attack them now, while they’re distracted.”

Att-Lass looked at her in surprise. Only minutes ago, she had been pleading with Lactarius for peace.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said. “You felt it. You know what Velenor told us about yellow light, and you saw what the fast one just did. They’re five beings who wield fear itself, and they have far more experience than any of us. If we’re going to survive this, we need every advantage we can get, and right now they’ve turned their backs on us to play a children’s game.”

“CROWN! TALON! FEATHER!”

“Five Crowns?” Voutros cried from the rise. “Who throws Crown twice in a row?”

“Again!” Lactarius commanded, and the five fists rose once more.

“You’re right,” Att-Lass said quietly. “We won’t get another chance like this, and I’m sure the Guardian wishes us to do battle as well.”

Revan was already nodding. “On my signal. Twig, you take the big one. Carina, the fast one.”

“I am Groot,” Twig rumbled.

All four of them raised their rings together. Green light gathered around their hands as Att-Lass began shaping a construct. Revan drew breath to give the signal.

“CROWN! TALON! FEATHER!”

The game ended before he could say a word. The circle went silent. Four Talons hung in the air, hooked and fierce, and in the middle of them, a single small hand had opened into a Feather.

Lactarius examined the result. “Feather beats Talon.”

“Feather beats Talon,” Crémont confirmed, sounding devastated.

Voutros looked personally offended. “That’s impossible. I never lose at Crown, Talon, Feather.”

“I won,” Pegma whispered. Then his face lit up with pure joy. “I WON! CAPTAIN, I WON! I GET TO GO!”

“Very well,” Lactarius said. “The rules are the rules, and the Special Forces honour the rules.” He laid a gloved hand on Pegma’s shoulder, bending down to manage it. “Go, Pegma. Represent the Imperial Guard. Represent the Majestor. Show these Green Lanterns the strength of the Empire.”

Pegma saluted so hard he nearly struck himself in the face. “I won’t let you down, Captain!”

Then Lactarius turned towards the Lanterns and regarded them for a long, silent moment before laughing, low and contemptuous.

“Look at them,” he said. “The noble Green Lanterns. While we settled our contest with honour, they gathered their courage to strike at our backs.” He shook his head slowly. “Cowards, every one of you. But I should not be surprised. The first of your kind betrayed the Empire the moment it suited him, and his children have learned the lesson well. Such are the Green Lanterns.”

“Go get them, Pegma!”

Pegma marched to the edge of the rise, and his companions called after him with varying degrees of encouragement. Att-Lass watched him approach. It would have been easy to dismiss the squat little figure, but as Pegma walked, the yellow light around him thickened and darkened.

Carina flinched at the crack of a whip that was not there. Att-Lass found himself standing before the selection council again, with every examiner laughing and his uncle silent at the back of the room.

Pegma stopped at the very edge of the rise, and his eyes began to glow a deep, burning yellow.

“Green Lanterns,” he said, “the Special Forces of the Imperial Guard will now teach you **fear**.”

Att-Lass raised his ring, forming a shield and sword, while Revan summoned a large gun and Carina encased herself in emerald armour.

They never got the chance to attack.

Something green dropped out of the sky so fast that Att-Lass barely registered it before both of its boots struck Pegma squarely in the chest. The impact cracked across the plain like thunder, hurling the little warrior backwards across the rise and straight through a stone outcrop several hundred feet behind his companions. Fragments of rock rained down across the grass.

For a moment, no one moved. A young man stood where Pegma had been, wearing a simple green and black uniform with a faint emerald aura surrounding him. His face was so familiar that it took Att-Lass only a moment to understand why.

He looked like Lord Ion. He had the same face and the same eyes, but he was considerably younger, and his uniform lacked the cape and elaborate details of the Guardian's attire. It resembled the simple suits worn by Lantern recruits like themselves.

"Is that...?" Revan began.

Att-Lass glanced towards the cliff. Ion was still there. Then who was this?

"He looks like Ion," Carina breathed.

"I am Groot!" Twig cried, pointing.

The young man turned towards them. His expression softened with amusement, and he gave the four of them a playful wink before turning back to the Imperial Guard.

Their reaction was very different. Crémont's face twisted with fury, Voutros's mouth hung open, Tyron's tail had gone rigid behind him, and even Captain Lactarius seemed briefly unable to speak.

They recognised him. This was the man who had once stood beside the Phoenix, the ancient enemy whose name had become part of the Empire's darkest legends, the one their Majestor had warned them about personally.

Lactarius recovered first.

"GREEN LANTERN MAX!"

The name rang across the plains. Lactarius took a step forward with yellow light surging around him, and his companions spread out into combat positions.

"You dare appear before the Special Forces of the Imperial Guard?"

The newcomer glanced at the smoking hole where Pegma had vanished, then looked over the four warriors who remained. He rolled his shoulders and grinned as emerald light gathered around his hands.

"So, are you four going to fight us," he asked, "or do you need another dance routine to work up the courage?"