

Choking on the ashes of his enemy

Von ArmitageHux

Kapitel 1:

The night before battle, Hux lies perfectly still underneath his fur covers. They're an uncomfortable weight pressing down on his body, leaving him sweltering in his own anxiety. He suppresses the urge to kick them away. He cannot afford to behave like a spoiled child when everyone else is forced to face the prospect of death with no shelter against the harsh winds from the east. Although it does not seem like the soldiers of Arkanis are fretting about their impending doom as much as they should be, their voices a too loud reminder of Hux's status of a true outsider. It is not like he particularly enjoys the company of the men either. They are terribly dull, incapable of holding a thought for ten minutes and rely too much on brutal strength. Hux knows that he is better than them, more than the blunt object with which his father may cave in the skull of an opponent.

Outside, one of the younger soldiers laughs heartily and Hux can't stop the heat from creeping up on his cheeks as he imagines what they are probably talking about. Ever since King Snoke declared war upon Queen Organa and her land of heathens, bets have been made about his untimely death. How many seconds until the pampered bastard of a respected war general goes down. Hux has seen them smirk at his slight frame whenever they stop at a river to wash the grime of their skin, every delicate freckle on his shoulders like a compromising piece of evidence in the never ending case against him. Not made for battle. Not made for war. Not made to hold his own against a dashing enemy, let alone a skilled mage...

Hux has decided to prove them wrong.

His hand slides underneath the dirty pillow where the pile of parchment seems to be waiting for the touch of his quill. Contentment settles in the hollow between his ribs as he feels the rough texture against his fingertips. For a second, he considers scrambling up to light a candle but the noise outside halts him in his tracks. Apparently, his supposed comrades have discovered the bottles of wine and are now occupying themselves drinking their worries away. He hears them chuckling quietly, glasses clinking when they toast to staring death in the eye like heroes. Hux can't help but scoff at that. Glory will not find them here, cowering in the dirt like ants while an unseen force tries to snuff out their lives. This is not how he plans on leaving this world: Bleeding out underneath a rotting corpse while pretending the approaching darkness might lift him up to a place that is warm and save and all his.

As a child, he thought differently. Whenever he could sneak away, he grabbed a wooden sword and swung it at a tree repeatedly until he cried from exhaustion. Training, he called that disgrace of a display. He had really thought that he would grow big and strong and somewhere along this honourable path he would stop imagining his own face in the swirling patterns of the lifeless wood. Strike down his insecurities, he never could. Father might love him if he learned to hit harder than the back of his hand.

Unfortunately, the back of Brendol's hand had hit harder. Always.

No, Hux thinks, resting his head back again. If he wants to survive, he can not get distracted by childish sentimentalities. The letter had to wait. He promised himself his fear would also remain in this stuffy tent, stored away underneath this pillow. Maybe he won't need to return to both when the battle was over.

He must have fallen asleep at some point because when the screeching startles him awake, the soldiers have gone to their tents, leaving the camp to drift in the foreboding silence of upcoming destruction. Hux sits up, his tongue feels like it's made from cotton and the stale sweat on his skin now makes him shiver in the night breeze. What was that? He leans forward, carefully listening. Everything is eerily quiet outside, heart pounding against his chest like a prisoner. His mind drags him to a rumour he had heard once about Organa possessing a dragon. A gigantic beast in shackles who will not turn against his captor but burn down through flesh and bones of whole armies. Hux tries not to imagine nothing in between himself and twenty tons of destruction but a tiny sword in his shaking hands. Ridiculous! None of the sort has been confirmed. Maybe he should have sipped from the wine to calm his nerves after all. Almost ready to except the noise as a sign of his useless imagination, he turns on his side. Just when approaching sleep soothes the ripples of worry in his mind, the screech returns. More out of common sense than certainty, he decides this can't be a dragon. It sounds too small. Too frightened, too.

Despite his better judgement, he pushes himself up and grabs for his pants before stepping outside. The night air usually smells clean, but the war has made everything reek of ash and death. Hux is convinced he can taste the fires of the burning village they spotted on their way here, the scorched corpses here to haunt them for their failures, but it's a ludicrous assumption. They had passed that place days ago, the wind probably even blowing into the wrong direction. It's nerves, plain and simple. Thinking it makes him feel silly for following an unidentified noise to the edge of the camp. The roaring laughter of his comrades would be nothing against the piercing stare of his disappointed father.

When the next screech comes, Hux is almost prepared to pay it no mind and return to his tent like he ought to. However, this time it is accompanied by a panicked flapping

of wings that make him perk up. Suddenly, he knows what he has been hearing and he wants to slap himself for the foolishness of it all. Of course, he'd be idiotic enough to be lured out of the camp by a fucking raven! He turns his head toward the noise but is greeted by an unexpected, no, an impossible sight: There sits the raven frantically moving inside a cage which is dangling from a branch as if this is exactly where it belongs. What in all the world's name is going on?

Hux feels hesitant to come near the cage. Whoever set it up there must still be nearby. Well, if it was a trap it certainly was the most creative one he has ever encountered. Not to forget completely useless. How would anyone even know someone would pay mind to the frightened noises of a bird? A forest is surely not to be considered the ideal place to set up such a ridiculous design. Suddenly Hux feels ready to sleep.

Apparently, the bird thinks otherwise. As if having read his mind he starts to flap his wings more wildly, rattling the cage to the point of tumbling down. Hux jerks forward without thinking and catches the cage in his arms. The weight is unexpected and almost pulls his shoulders out of their sockets.

"Hush! Be quiet or I'll make soup out of you!" As he puts his face closer to the bars, the bird picking for his nose angrily. Hux barely manages to avoid getting poked by a surprisingly sharp beak. "I should have let you fall, you avian ingrate!" Maybe he would have done exactly that, but the way the raven was flapping his massive wings inside his confinement seemed off. Lopsided somehow. He was not an expert, but that cage was clearly too small for such a big bird. Maybe whoever did this, wasn't as much an opponent in war but just cruel.

The raven seems to notice his hesitation because it goes very quiet all of a sudden. Its eyes like black pearls, staring into Hux's face with striking intelligence. Help me, he seemed to say. If animals unexpectedly developed the abilities to form complex requests, of course. Well, that is clearly nothing more than another one of his childish sentimentalities, but he couldn't possibly let that bird die out here. Even if he doesn't know the details, this raven is not what his previous owner had in mind. Leaving it to die in the most cruel and prolonged way. Maybe it had to do with the injury on its crooked wing, maybe it was just...useless. Hux sighed deeply, having already made up his mind.

"You are to be quiet and good, do you understand? If you cause trouble, I'll wring your neck."

The bird clicks its beak, offended. Oh, as if it has any right to be! "I am making a complete idiot out of myself for you. You'd fare well to oblige."

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Opening the cage proves to be more difficult than anticipated. There is no door, no opening, even the floor does not seem to be removable upon further inspection. Hux feels himself grow agitated with the impossibility of it all. How can something like this even exist?

He shoots the bird inside an accusing look: "How did you get in there in the first place?"

The bird flaps its wings threateningly, opening its beak attempting to let out one of its deafening screeches. Hux interjects, feeling panicked: "Shush! If needless complaining was able to bend metal, you would have freed yourself by now, don't you think?!"

Strangely, the bird complies, dark eyes too focused on Hux's face. It's not like he isn't used to being the object of scrutinizing stares but he can't help wondering: Where did he go wrong to find himself at the receiving end of a bird's scepticism?

It is not until he steals tools from the chest in the middle of the night, shivering his thin night shirt that he fully realizes the extent of his transgression. Is he really going to waste time and resources to save an abandoned bird, probably locked away by magic anyway? Such careful containment seems odd for such a harmless animal, so there must be a reason for it. Hux is not creative enough to come up with a properly scary scenario in which a fucking bird tears apart his entire squadron but he is not beyond suspicion either. Rightfully so, if one considers how sly mages can be. It is this unholy power running through their veins, corrupting their hearts to evil deeds. They do not care for order, nor for rules or the lives they meddle with.

When Hux was four years old, he had to learn the hard way to never expect mercy from a mage. Also, to never trust the world to make things right without his interference. There is no justice unless it's man-made.

"Armitage!"

The voice knocks into him like a fist and somehow, he is surprised when he doesn't immediately fall over. His hands cramp up around the saw-handle, while his heart pumps fear into him. "General!"

Hux has outgrown his father years ago, but the man in front of him is massive, wide in a way that Hux has envied as a child but now sees as a sign of indiscipline. Brendol is nothing but a wall into which Hux has been running his whole life with ambition.

A list of things he has to show for it: Broken bones and bruises, the ability not to cry when a stronger person dares him to in front of an impassive audience, and a growing pile of violent fantasies –some of which he plans to carry out when Hux's reputation finally matches his physical height.

A childish little thing, whimpering inside of him wants to duck away from the cold attention of his father, but another impulse –somehow exactly as small and helpless, forbids him to do so and he straightens his back: "Father."

Nothing in Hux's demeanor gives away the unusual circumstances of their meeting: The general's only son found outside of his tent the night before an important battle, clutching a saw while his comrades sleep.

Brendol squints. The outlines of his face have become blurry years ago, pink splotches blooming on his fleshy cheeks, but he manages to seem threatening regardless, his eyes too small to hold any kindness.

"What are you doing here, boy?"

Hux's nose twitches. Brendol has never been a subtle person, too eager to assert his dominance in ways that tend to make him look desperate and insecure. Nevertheless, his cruel remarks are effective on Hux in ways he could never admit to himself, poking that weeping thing cowering inside his chest until it starts wailing in agony.

"I was about to return this item to its rightful place. It seems to me as if your soldiers had too much fun causing disorder within the camp. Figures, seeing as they're drunk while on duty."

He can see Brendol's hand twitch. Even though he knows he is safe, Hux's mouth dries up. The times of his father's fist coming down on him whenever disappointment or mood compelled Brendol to do so, are long over. As a soldier, a possible heir to his position, Brendol is forced to treat him as such, reducing his abuse to cutting remarks or hateful sneers. Hux swallows audibly, waiting. Surely the general would not cause a scene in hearing distance of his men.

"Be careful how you talk to me. My patience is not endless."

"Yes, Sir." Somewhere along the way, Hux has learned that the right amount of sarcasm in his tone is just enough to convey distaste without provoking his father's anger too much.

"You will ride up front tomorrow."

The saw almost slips out of his hands, fingers trembling. Rage boils up in him, blistering his pounding heart. Of course, he would do that. Why put up with a disappointment when you can profit from a supposed hero's death? His corpse, wrapped in the arkanian flag would be worth more to Brendol than every breath his rotten offspring ever took. This is not fair. He has always followed orders, always tried!

"Do you have something to say, Armitage?" I dare you, boy. Give me a reason.

Hux doesn't do him the favour. Chest swelling, he shakes his head. Calmly. "No, Sir. It will be an honour to bring victory." He will not die. Will not. Will never.

Brendol leaves him then without another word. There is bile on his tongue, when worry finally settles deep in his stomach.

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"Stop squirming, you're making it worse."

Hux sits on his furs, trying to convince this god forsaken creature to accept his help.

He never would have thought that wrestling a bird into submission could be this difficult –or that he would be ever interested in doing so in the first place. If his comrades could see him now, they'd have a riot. Armitage Hux has finally found his calling: Caretaker of stray and useless animals.

He forces himself to shove his humiliation aside: The bird is in worse condition than he thought. The injuries on his wings are extensive, feathers flying everywhere as the raven tries to scramble away from Hux's admissions. There is blood on his nightshirt already and a sickening crunching noise in every movement. The wings are gigantic and the raven flails more when Hux attempts to grab them for inspection, conveniently hitting him in the face. Naturally.

"Will you stop? Here!" Hux shoves the gauze into the raven's face. He doesn't feel particularly patient at the moment and he could imagine spending his last hours more effectively. He also can't help but take it personally when the raven pecks at him once more, just for good measure.

"Ow! Look! Gauze. Ointment. This is normally for humans so be a little thankful. I could throw you to the soldiers right now. I am sure you'll make an adequate hangover-breakfast!"

That seems to offend the bird enough to return to its attempts at stabbing Hux with vigour, beak jabbing at his arms until Hux flinches away shrieking. "You stupid little—" Hux sighs before he rubs his temples. "Look, I know you're just an animal...You probably have no idea what is happening right now. You're scared that I'll hurt you more. I know...But you will never fly again if you don't start to trust me a little. Do you understand that?"

The bird crooks his neck quizzically. Hux feels stupid. "Of course, you don't."

To his surprise, the bird complies. For a minute, he feels speechless. A strange emotion washes over him as that shivering body presses himself against his lap, seeking warmth.

It turns out, this little creature has the ability to be perfectly pleasant when it's not planning to slice Hux's arteries open. It only glances at him suspiciously before letting Hux clumsily administer the ointment to its gaping wounds. Hux suppresses the urge to gag a little, remembering the broken bodies of dying soldiers, clutching at oozing wounds in dirty sickbays they would never leave again. He tries not to think of himself lying there with no hand to hold, mind full of regrets as Brendol stares down on him, pleased with himself. His fingers start to tremble enough that the bird flinches away once more.

"Sorry." Hux mumbles, more to himself. "I am not a doctor, let alone for animals. Don't act so spoiled. When I was little, no one treated my wounds like this."

The bird stretches its neck, trying to get a better look at Hux's face. He seems like a child waiting for the rest of a goodnight's story.

"Stop staring at me. There is nothing more to it. I apparently wasn't worth much gauze."

Those small black pearls never leave him, however, and Hux can't help but shudder at the humanness of his attention. Nervousness now caught in his mind like a fly bumping into the walls of his skull.

"There. All done."

Hux doesn't know what he expects of the bird when he finishes patching its wounds, but surely not for it to get comfortable on his pillow.

"Now, that's just wishful thinking. Get off."

Nothing happens. Hux groans, shoving the bird aside just enough to rest his own head there, before he leans over to blow out the candle.

He doesn't know what compels the creature to come even closer then and nestle its warm body in the crook of Hux's neck as if trusted with the precious task of protecting his pulse, but he decides he is too tired to mind, falling asleep with his cheek pressed against black feathers.

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Morning comes too early, and it reeks of rotten blood and the soft dirt of fresh graves. The soft glow of an early sun only a reminder of the horrors soon to be illuminated. The soldiers around him seem to contemplate their fate, jaws set, as their horses carry them away from safety and pre-battle bravado. Hux looks back one last time, the raven sitting patiently on top of his tent like a beacon he can use to find his way home.

Before he left, Hux has fed the bird with cheese and stale leftover bread from dinner the night before, assured by the fact that ravens are omnivores and that it's not uncommon to come across one of them digging through garbage cans. Or corpses, a voice whispers more quietly, his mind already having turned back to the grave lazily. "You will wait for me, alright? I will be back eventually." It has almost not been strange, talking to the animal, petting its head now with two fingers while it devours its meager meal. Hux has told himself that it must be his return to pesky old habits: Hug yourself close, console yourself with gentle words as if spoken by someone who cares, leaning over you before breathing a good night's kiss onto your wet cheeks. Armitage, wake up you fool.

After the camp disappears behind another corner, Hux is not so sure of that anymore. The raven always seems so attentive, its soft noises of encouragement soothing the lonely edges of Hux's soul by giving him a reason to survive other than spite. Someone must feed this animal and if Hux doesn't return, it would surely perish from its injuries. Maybe still waiting on that tent like a forsaken child.

Although completely inane, the thought frees him from Brendol, separates his breath

from that hateful, bellowing voice in a way that presses confidence into his bones even as he rides closer to bloodshed.