

Choking on the ashes of his enemy

Von ArmitageHux

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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.

Kapitel 2:

Hux has never liked Canady, an arrogant man his father's age who never dared to outright reprimand the son of his superior, but who has stood there countless of times while someone else did the job swiftly, painfully. Whenever possible, Hux tried to avoid him, shooting a warning glance in passing to remind Canady of his inferiority. The old man always narrowed his eyes, angry at the possibility of receiving an order from the weakling-bastard.

Despite everything, Hux feels the warmth drop out of his body as Canady spits blood at him with his last, gurgling breath.

He is still staring at Canady's muddy eyes, vacant of all hatred now, when realisation sinks in: He is going to die. Chaos has erupted all around him. The foul stench of blood and burned bodies crawls up his nose, while his fingers dig into the soft, wet earth where he has fallen minutes ago. As if this could anchor him to the world before he floats away completely. His breath is forcing its way out of him in panicked little, gasps that make him feel like his sternum must be splintered where the mage had slammed the staff into him.

He is dying. This is the end...Canady's open mouth is a bloodied cave from which the end is leering at him.

A man runs and runs across the battlefield, burning like a living torch and unable to do anything but scream into the void he's probably seeing until he's not. Hux tries to crawl away undetected, slowly dragging the aching weight of his body through the mud. He won't make it. Can't make it. To his right, someone sobs violently, tears bubbling out like an unspoken agreement of compliance: Yes, if death comes they will be good and follow, treading softly. Meanwhile, the trampling steps of hundreds of mages shake the ground beneath him, slashing the bravery out of chests, striking his soldiers with lightning so that their corpses keep on twitching long after their hearts have stopped. No prisoners. Only victory and gore. No. No, please...He can't die yet!

Hux has never felt the staggering rush of euphoria upon survival, has never gazed at the orange light of the morning sun with more than cold indifference, never known what useless pleasure a simple kiss could give him, not even has he finished the last sentence in his silly little letter which would forever be waiting underneath that dirty pillow now. Waiting. Someone is waiting for him, he can not die. Please...

Hux wakes up with a wordless shout.

He is soaking wet, the memory of his first battle drying on him like old sweat. With his knuckles pressed into the sockets of his eyes, he tries forcing the dream back into his skull where he would bury it deep into the crumpled folds of his mind. A place where all the pain in him resides, probably rotting by now.

His tongue feels like a dead thing itself and the inside of his cheek is bleeding where he had bitten down on it in fear. Hux closes his eyes, drawing in the night air which

still smells faintly of ash and smoke from the pyres. Only yesterday they have burned another batch of deceased soldiers. The sickbay would soon be empty again...

Hux turns his head to the side when the raven gently nudges at his cheek. There is something uncharacteristically concerned behind its intelligent eyes, which Hux finds particularly hard to bear. It is, of course, more likely that he is still projecting, secretly holding on to the childish idea of sharing his worries with someone completely free of prejudice. What a ridiculous delusion! This holds especially true for the stupid raven who is the worst possible candidate for such a role. In fact, Hux believes he has never encountered such a judgmental little beast before!

"Don't look at me like that," his voice sounds raspy, lips grasping at words awkwardly "Do I look like I need pity from an animal? I might as well bend the knee for Organa's army of murderous wizards!"

This, however, earns him an angry jab to the forehead. Hux rears backwards, almost rolling out of his fur-covers completely.

"Ow! You fucking—" Exasperated, Hux decides to give up before this blows up into a full-fledged battle scene. He is feeling insane enough as it is and doesn't need to be caught up in a duel of wits against a bird. Whatever would he tell himself if he loses?! Seeing how his mind has been slowly collapsing in on itself ever since he returned, it wouldn't exactly surprise him if he lost the capability to hold his own against a dumb animal. So much for his career...

The raven looks pacified by Hux's resignation. It is probably congratulating itself to an easy victory. Or it is just a damn bird with no advanced cognitive functions whatsoever and he is a lunatic.

Outside he can already see the grey beginnings of an early-morning sky eating at the horizon. It's already too late to go back to sleep since he's expected to turn up for communal breakfast after sunrise. The thought of just rolling around becomes even more unappealing with the images of dying warriors rushing through his mind whenever he blinks. Instead, he decides to fish the crumpled parchment from his dirty pillowcase, carefully smoothing them out with one hand before reaching over for his quill.

The bird blinks at him curiously and hops closer without otherwise disturbing the concentrated silence of Hux's writing. Hux dully notes that he appreciates this.

For a while there is nothing, but the warmth of the raven's body pressed against his naked upper arm and the quiet scratching of the quill. In moments like these, Hux dares to indulge in silly fantasies, safe within the confinement of his own mind: He imagines his letter to be read one day, a pair of eyes he has never actually seen, hopping from word to word, maybe leaking with regret. She would love to hear from him, clutch at her chest and swallow down a tearful sob. Maybe she'd ask him to meet, just so she can grab his shoulders and squeeze his arms. She'd be so proud, close to bursting. Shamefully, Hux admits that he would like that very much; Tell her everything about his life. Explain himself to her as if his sole existence needs justification.

Somehow Hux's face becomes so scrunched up that it's almost painful to relax his brows when he finally decides to stuff everything back to where it belongs.

The raven makes an ugly squawking sound before rubbing its beak lovingly against Hux's side. It probably craves attention, aware of the routine by now: Hux would wake in a cold sweat and waste his time writing for a while, before redressing its wounds with steady efficiency. It has become easier to handle the little animal by now, their angry bickering also turning into a familiar feeling which he uses more and more to hide from recurring night terrors.

When he scoops the bird into his arms to wash out the crusted blood from its feathers, he feels strangely comforted. He is suddenly struck by a childhood memory, as if a hasty movement had reopened a sore wound somewhere inside of him.

He had been very small, maybe four, and almost on his knees with desperation. A pet, he wanted a pet. Something to protect and call his own when nothing else could ever be. Of course, his request had been met with Brendol's fist so that he never dared to ask again. It wasn't even an animal in particular that was so appealing to him, but just the thought of having any companion at all.

Although he is more in control of himself now, the need to be close to something has been recently coming back to him in short powerful waves, making him pet the bird excessively and glide his hand along smooth, black feathers. The raven seems to enjoy this. He starts to rub his head against Hux's palm, greedily asking for more.

"Ha. You're so needy. How about being a little humble?"

The bird looks up at him in quiet disapproval, as if it is Hux who is insolent for suggesting such a thing. He immediately nuzzles Hux's hand harder just to be contrary. What an idiot!

"I will be back after breakfast. You know the rules by now. No leaving, no disturbing the order, no senseless screaming."

Hux squints, unsure if this rude little creature has just rolled its eyes at him. Which would not only be incredibly unthankful but also physically impossible! Concerned, Hux reminds himself not to get lost in that little play of make-believe he has constructed around his relationship to the bird. It's a crutch to cope with trauma, nothing more. A disgraceful little habit he only allows himself to entertain because the alternative of dealing with it all by himself makes his stomach eat itself, and every thought float away from his head.

Everyone is exceptionally quiet at breakfast, seemingly occupied with their own variation of what happened on the battlefield a week ago. They have lost enough men to greatly diminish their army and consequently extinguish any trace of bold confidence. Or any belief in victory whatsoever. Some seats are poignantly left empty, serving as a makeshift memorial which inspires many men to stare at them between listless bites of hard cheese.

Hux considers their loss a tragedy too, albeit not because of some reckless imbeciles who were unable to escape with their bodies intact, but for the deep shame he feels over losing against Queen Organa. As the General's son, he sees this as a personal failure, burning its way into the core of his convictions. She has allowed mages to roam the lands without supervision for far too long, refusing to hold them on a leash, violent murderers now free and very much capable of sweeping the life out of entire villages –proven by the many dead Arkanians now finally at peace in their graves.

"No butter. Again!" Stridan slams his fist against the table, startling everyone.

"I think we have worse problems than butter..." Thanisson mutters, lips still pressed against the rim of his water bottle. Hux knows him as one of the slighter soldiers, still babyfaced at twenty and inexplicably free of the prejudices that seem to haunt his every step.

"It's not only the butter! It's everything!" There is a muscle twitching in Stridan's left cheek as he chews on his opinion for a while. He looks like a spooked horse, ready to flee and about to remorselessly trample everyone in his path.

"We are going to fucking die here!" He blurts, looking surprised with himself "Canady is dead. I saw Rodino –He had no chance! Impaled on a fucking staff...Didn't even see it coming, the poor bastard! Yesterday, Weel died in the sickbay like some dirty dog! You should have seen him –he didn't- He wasn't even lucid! I can't do this anymore! How can you stuff yourself and wait for them to get you, too? How..." Stridan trails off, lips quivering.

His outburst stuns everyone. Mitaka sits next to him, head bowed. It annoys Hux how the man tries to shrink in on himself while ripping apart precious rations of bread with trembling fingers.

"Am I assuming correctly that this is a plan of desertion in the making, Stridan?" Hux's eyes are hard. He has no empathy for traitors, no use for grown men who can't control themselves and cry without shame like children. If not stopped, he'll drag the entire squad with him into madness. Hux straightens his back: "Is this a confession, Stridan?"

Stridan looks taken aback. He doesn't answer, helplessly glancing at his comrades. Maybe he is waiting for one of them to burst into laughter like they always do behind Hux's back. This time, no one comes to his aid.

"Answer me!" Hux barks. He's alarmed upon hearing his father's voice, until he notices –to his horror- that it's coming from his own mouth. His ears are ringing, he is suddenly standing. How did that happen?

"No!" Stridan hesitates, "No, I am of course not –what are you even..." He slumps a little, ashamed of himself. Rightfully so, Hux thinks.

"Good. We'll see if cutting your rations in half will make you more thankful for what

you have.”

Hux returns to his breakfast then, even though he hates eating, hates this war, hates the fact that they just can't win. He wants to puke but doesn't. He wants to scream but keeps his mouth shut. He wants to personally reach into every mage's body and rip their rotten hearts out for causing so much suffering. But he, too, is powerless and desperate, tied to this table instead.

They are all silent again afterwards.

Caught between the indignant glances of supposed comrades, and his own occupation with what had just happened, it takes him longer than anticipated to return to his tent. By the time he arrives with stolen food hidden in his shirt, he is half-expecting the bird to have gone on a hunger fuelled destruction spree. Nevertheless, when he shoves the flaps of the entrance aside, the scenario takes him off guard, grabbing at his throat like a fist.

The letters have been pulled from their spot underneath his pillow and neatly splayed out in a row, page by page, vomiting his words into the world. The raven is sitting atop the blankets, its long, pointed beak moving from one line to the next as if examining the contents.

Hux surges forward to tear the letters away, startling the creature enough to attempt a pathetic flap of its broken wings. It screeches in agony before weakly flopping back onto the furs. Hux winces in sympathy but remains on his knees, gathering the parchment protectively against his chest. Paralyzing terror seizes him when he considers the possibility that this might not have been the raven's doing but someone else's. Isn't everyone keen on bringing Brendol's bastard down a notch or two?

Stridan would of course be an obvious suspect, seeing the complete lack of shame over his treacherous streak and the visible anger for being punished accordingly. Sickened by the image of Stridan putting his grimy paws all over his most intimate thoughts, he swears the man will regret underestimating the lengths to which Hux is willing to go to save face. His eyes dart around the tent wildly, determined to find any evidence to support his suspicion and start plotting an inevitable revenge, when he notices the raven slowly inching away from him.

The sight is incriminating in unexpected ways and enough to convince him that Stridan has nothing to do with it.

Head tucked in and feathers ruffled, the raven resembles an overly large, black cotton ball whose eyes stick out like glistening buttons. Judgemental. Eerily enough, he suspects something uncomfortably self-aware in them, beyond anything he can reasonably explain.

Hux finds himself unable to deny the shame dribbling down on him like rain. It slowly washes away the last remnants of panic induced paranoia, revealing some sort of wounded irrationality hidden at the core of his frantic behaviour. Hux is left feeling overly exposed in front of this bizarre creature, more than naked, where its knowing

gaze peels away every layer of false confidence like skin. Suddenly he's five years old again, small and incapable, at the mercy of someone who can reach into his chest, pull a weapon from his heart and point it at him whenever they want. The raven doesn't look away, cautious but unafraid, making Hux wonder why he is starting to feel like he has betrayed some fragile trust between them.

"Those are mine!" Hux says, sounding like a stubborn child, even to himself.

The raven doesn't move away anymore, nor does it start to attack Hux like it used to. Instead, it nestles down onto the fur-covers more comfortably, its eyes calmly demanding a better explanation. Apparently, Hux's defence wasn't good enough to make up for the fact, that the ham and apple-slices he had brought are now scattered on the floor.

"What do you want? I am not justifying myself in front of you."

The raven doesn't spare Hux any recognition aside from a dismissive click of its beak. Hux scoffs in return, hoping to sound detached and dignified—even though it is admittedly difficult to conjure a feeling of natural superiority while trying to impress a damn bird.

"Oh, well then...Feel free to pout all you want. It won't change the fact, that you are the one who overstepped a line." Hux rises to his feet, careful this time to put the letters inside of a wooden box that normally rests in the corner of his tent, untouched. He is embarrassed by the intensity of his reaction, blood pooling warmly in his cheeks, ears glowing like the end of a mage's staff. He hates the comparison and chastises himself for wasting so much emotional energy on nothing.

"I'm leaving again." He curtly gestures to the food scattered on the ground "You'll be able to help yourself."

There is an urgent need to leave this stuffy tent behind. He is afraid to be followed by a weaker version of himself, a broken boy that only ever breathes in little gasps, shuddering sickly from behind the bars of his ribcage. Always on the verge of death but always hungry enough to eat away at everything he's supposed to be. It's the raven's fault, he tells himself as he crosses over to the other side of the camp.

Whenever Hux believes to have choked the child along with its need to be understood, the raven breathes wordless empathy into it until it lives again.

Hux is sure this must be why he had been denied a pet as a child. He has become emotionally incontinent through it, constantly soiling himself with wrath and love and self-pity.

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Hux attempts to occupy himself with various tasks afterwards. First, to avoid having to go back to the tent and see that the raven has probably fluttered off to someplace else, as well as to return and find that it didn't.

Stranded in his own mind, he feels compelled to work with hands, like he did in his teenage years when the thought of always remaining his father's sole source of shame had been unbearable. Back then, it was strangely comforting to see that he could make a difference, build or destroy as he pleases, no matter how unskilled a fighter, how weak a son he was. Hux returns to this place of simple contentment now as he settles in a quiet corner of the camp and starts to polish weapons and armour with unnecessary vigour, scrubbing angrily at blood stains and rust until their shine deems them worthy of royalty. He hates the acidic stench of the solution which always makes his eyes water and burns his fingerprints away, but the thought of wiping away his emotions like dirt is too enjoyable to stop.

Hux is startled out of his meditational state not long afterwards by a gruff voice calling his name from behind.

When Hux looks up, he is faced with Terex, a loathsome man whose loyalty he suspects to be completely dependable on the amount of gold he is offered. Fittingly, his visage seems perpetually frozen in what Hux can only consider the condescending sneer of a dishonest merchant. At least their dislike is mutual, thus making it easy to avoid stepping on each other's toes around the campsite. Normally.

"What is it, Terex?" Hux asks as monotonously as possible, trying to signal his disinterest in dragged out conversation.

Terex however, doesn't seem to get the message. His cocked eyebrow and raised lip are almost enough to make Hux groan, if it weren't for his determination to remain above it all.

"I wonder what you did now." Terex says, bordering on giddy. A grotesque sight on a greying, middle-aged man of his size.

Hux's brows shoot up. Every time Terex feels joy about something, it can only mean catastrophe for everyone else. The man has always been exceptionally cruel and Hux is more than willing to believe the rumours about Terex's attraction towards slavery.

"As you can see, I was busy preparing our armoury for battle. I expect you'll be able to join as soon as you're done with your game of guessing?" Hux's smile is humourless, his eyes sharp.

The amusement falls from Terex's face in an instant, tone cutting: "I am sure you have nothing to fear then, Armitage. Although your father doesn't seem to be so sure about that, he was demanding your immediate presence. Seems pissed off, if you ask me."

Hux feels his limbs become numb, all blood creeping out of his arms into the cavity of his chest, cold with shock already. His heart is just swimming in the puddle for a while, drifting away from him as he stares at Terex with wide eyes. More out of spite for the satisfaction pulling at the corners of Terex's mouth than true strength, he manages to climb back into the conversation.

"Yes. Good." Hux blinks the last bit of confusion from his face before he squares his

shoulders and lifting his chin. "I will see to it, right away."

Without giving Terex the courtesy of even a simple nod, he turns around to make his way towards the largest tent at the edge of the camp. It's bright red, ridiculously vibrant in the warm glow of the afternoon sun and guarded by two soldiers with mean faces. They make a point of examining Hux closely when he approaches, acting as if they've never seen him before. It is a fruitless attempt at undermining his confidence that doesn't even faze him enough to elicit as much as an exasperated eyeroll. When he was younger, it probably would have been enough to scare him away, so that Brendol had an excuse to send his brutish minions for a quick lesson of discipline.

Hux leaves them to their fittingly dull tasks.

As soon as he is inside the tent, the smell of smoked ham and burnt kale invades his nose. His father is sitting at an overly heavy desk, which he insists must be wooden, despite the lack of practicality. Conveniently enough, Brendol is also the only one who is not sleeping wrapped in moldy furs, but on something akin of a real bed, a shaky construction with several soft, woollen blankets. The excessive opulence of the tent is almost ridiculous enough to make Hux sneer with disgust, if it wasn't for the massive figure of Brendol hunched over a map, only sparing his son a quick glance upon entry.

"There you are." He grunts, pupils stiff on the western territory.

"You wanted to speak to me." Hux keeps his back straight, gaze following Brendol's finger, as it traces a pathway through the mountains, unintentionally marking it already with some leftover grease from breakfast.

"You reprimanded Stridan today, I heard."

Brendol sounds composed, but Hux is not foolish enough to fall for any false sense of security. His father's mood can swing wildly within seconds, seemingly without provocation. Another reason why he is completely unfit to lead an army.

"Yes, it was necessary. He was causing a ruckus which had the potential to devolve into disobedience among soldiers if not snuffed out quickly."

"I do not appreciate you making decisions by yourself, Armitage." There was an edge to the syllables of his name, changing its meaning to an insult.

Hux swallows audibly, nails digging deeply into the calloused parts of his palms. He has seen his father deal with traitors before, the persisting fear of not being respected manifesting itself in unusual viciousness. Starvation, flogging, beheadings. Hux doesn't doubt that Brendol is itching with desire to make an example of him. Murdering his son for wrongfully assuming authority: The ultimate proof of his sturdy decisiveness.

Or rather, his mindless tyranny. Brendol never dwells on terminology.

"It won't happen again."

"It better won't!"

There is a pause. Hux's nails finally break through skin, digging into the flesh. The pain is good, it keeps him grounded as his mind wants to drift away.

"I have heard you've been wasting your time on an animal, Armitage."

The mood starts to shift dangerously towards an abyss, tilting underneath his feet no matter how much he struggles to keep his balance. Even if he knows better than to defy his father, there is rage boiling deep within the pit of his stomach and it's always there, threatening to bubble up and spill right through his throat, over his lips, into his life.

"It is useful." His voice comes from somewhere next to him, but Hux has no time to wonder how he is still in control of his mouth when it feels so far out of reach. "It can be trained to deliver urgent letters and distribute information about our enemy's whereabouts."

Brendol just laughs. "I have not given my permission for you to get a pet."

Hux has never had a particularly keen sense for justice. Even as a child, he had just always assumed rules to be unavoidable, the words of his elders to be law. He rather went to bed hungry, his fist pressed into the hollow of his stomach and keep it from rumbling, than ask for a second portion. It never occurred to him that chopping off a man's hand for stealing a mouldy piece of cheese from the kitchen could have been anything but a legitimate action against dirty thieves and traitors. Although his face went pale when his father forced him to watch as the man desperately clawed at the ground as if it were possible to get away from the falling blade. Actions have consequences. He was too weak, so he had to suffer for it until he finally learned to be stronger.

Something has changed.

Hux's heart is stopping in its tracks, blatantly refusing to keep on stomping down the path which surely will lead them to the raven's end. He imagines Brendol giving the order to wring its neck. Bones snapping so easily underneath an unrelenting grip while the raven weakly struggles, wings fluttering in blinded panic as he caws at Hux for one last time. He suddenly wants to vomit.

This...is unjust.

The creature is small and helpless, like he once was. Completely dependant against its will and innocent regarding the horrendous suicide mission these old, incompetent buffoons have turned the war into.

"It is not a pet, Sir. It will be an asset to us."

"Nonsense!" Hux slams into Brendol's tone like a brick wall. It is a harsh attempt at

cutting off Hux's tongue, and it works. He loses his voice, while Brendol speaks, towering over his adult son who averts his gaze nervously.

"You are too soft, Armitage. I have always known. From the day I first saw you, I thought: 'this boy's no good.' A useless waste of space and resources. Will eat the hair off our heads, drink our medicine like water and probably die a meaningless death in some ditch."

Hux inhales the words like poisonous gas, stinging in his throat and making his eyes gloss over. If he cries now, he will die. And the raven will perish alongside him. So, he does the reasonable thing and tries not to breathe as Brendol circles him, hungry with anger.

"But what did I do, Armitage? Did I give up on you when you kept on whining? When you writhed in your own disgusting weakness! No. I wanted to turn you into a man. A soldier I could be proud of." His face is suddenly close enough to smell the rotting Kale between his teeth. "You are nothing. You are my demise, boy. I have given you too much and you are eating away at me like a disease. Don't you think I know of your little letters to her? Your idiotic fantasies?"

No. No!

Hux gasps against his will, taking a step back to get away from the purple monstrosity of his father, away from the shifting dynamic that turns him into a hiding child. Although his voice is dying on his tongue, he forces an answer: "There are no fantasies, Sir."

And then Brendol's fleshy hands are on his throat. Hux chokes as Brendol seizes him by the collar of his uniform and shakes him violently, attempting to empty the truth out of him. There is nothing he can do but whimper weakly and try not to lose his foothold.

"You must think I am a moron! You must think me a fool! Don't you think I know about how much you want to run away?" Brendol screams, spit trickling down into his beard. He wants to sink his fist into Hux's face and break that freckled nose while his pupils keep on flickering wildly. He doesn't get the chance to do so, however, because something in Hux has awoken. A demon growling lowly in his chest, possessing him right then and there to shove Brendol away making him stumble into the edge of his desk, gaping like a gutted fish.

There is a beast from the past with the face of a boy, demanding a vengeance he never dared to take.

"My mother would have probably known how to raise a child!" He snarls at his father and the beast rejoices.

Brendol takes a moment to recover, face turning from pink to ashy in ugly splotches. Then, he chuckles. The mixture of contempt and satisfaction dripping from his voice slithers right into Hux's guts where it curls into itself like a snake. Something is off. No, this is not how it is supposed to go...

The man in front of him raises his upper lip, before he lowers his eyes. Hux tries to fight the urge to run as he slowly realises what is about to happen.

"Do you really think your mother wanted you?" Brendol barks out another laugh. "Ha! She practically threw you at me. I did her a favour by freeing her from the responsibility of having to take care of you. She was nothing, you stupid child. Exactly as you are nothing. She should have been thankful I gave her some importance by putting a potential heir into her. Instead, she was crying about it...That should have given me a hunch right away, that you're never going to amount to anything. Weak blood will always only give birth to weak blood."

The beast inside of Hux shrinks in fear and disgust. It is breaking down from within his heart chambers, kicking and screaming and tearing at him with self-loathing. Hux is overcome by the uncontrollable need to dig his own eyes out of his skull. He can't. He can't do anything to stop himself from knowing the meaning of those words.

He won't ever forget what Brendol has done to his mother.

"I wanted you to be like me. But I was mistaken. Now get out of my sight, before I forget myself."

Hux doesn't remember leaving.

The candle inside of him has been blown out, extinguishing all light he needs to see until he finds himself blinking blearily into his tent. For a few seconds, Hux doesn't know that he exists, his body suddenly a foreign and useless tool, only there to weigh him down.

The raven sits with him and nuzzles his cheek, cawing quizzically. It nudges him here and there, experimentally nipping at a strand of ginger hair before deciding it is not tasty enough. When Hux doesn't react to its satisfaction after a while, failing to praise and pet, it gladly returns to its old ways of trying to tear Hux into pieces, finally forcing him into reality.

"Ow! Stop, you insufferable imbecile!"

Predictably, insults don't make for a very good peace offering so it's not surprising that the raven becomes more violent instead. Hux feels too heavy to struggle, too tired to fight, too wrong, too old, and much too young...Finally, he says: "Stop! I'll read you the letters if you stop."

Under different circumstances, the way the raven immediately relents and perks up should have been a reason for concern, but it isn't. It is a much-needed affirmation. After everything that happened today, he is perfectly ready to accept the raven as an unlikely ally to his unwanted life.

The raven hovers over his arm, as if determined to read along while Hux speaks words

that only ever existed in silence. It is a deeply frightening feeling, but the child-beast in him sniffs at it curiously.

Let him get attached.

Dear Mother,

I am aware of how unusual it might be to receive this letter of a son you probably never anticipated to hear from again, but I consider it my duty to at least attempt some sort of contact. For what it's worth, I often find myself wondering about the person you might be.

Maybe your circumstances didn't allow to raise a child, you were possibly very young when you had me and thought Brendol Hux to be the best solution to your dilemma. I do not know the reasons for leaving me behind and I do not deem myself qualified to cast any judgement. I don't even hold a grudge towards the woman you were back then. I just want to get to know you, whatever that may mean now.

He is not like his father.

You'll be glad to know that I grew up well. I always had enough to eat and learned the most important aspects of combat strategy from a very young age. As you can imagine, it wasn't always easy to overcome my own weakness, yet I have never once given up. I wonder if you, too, are very determined?

Even though Brendol is exceptionally hard to please, which I am sure you are aware of, I am not saying too much when I tell you, I have earned his respect by now. I have always marched on, no matter the distance. I have always followed orders and trained hard, thinking you might hear of my accomplishments if they outstretched my own capabilities just enough, maybe even reaching into the outermost corners of the wilderness. Or Wherever you may be.

He is better.

Maybe I have lied before. Sometimes I do feel resentment towards you. It is natural that I missed my mother, isn't it? Very rarely, I allow myself the luxury to fantasize about the person I may have become with you by my side. Would he be a better man? Would he be a baker, kneading bread before sunrise to fill the air with pleasant sweetness? He could have been a tailor, doing his best to not poke customers with needles, but always draping them in beautiful ornaments. I would never know, and I suppose neither do you. As it is, I can't sow, and I can't bake. I don't know how to create anything at all. I fear to be good at destroying. This might be worth something to someone one day.

He is a weapon, not for Brendol.

Would it be impudent to say I would have wanted you here?

How often am I left staring into this hand-me-down void of yours? I know nothing of you and I don't want to think it also means I know nothing of myself.

What colour is your hair? Is it red like mine and Brendol's? Are you weak of health and prone to fever, like me? Do you also feel so helpless with anger all the time, that you can only suspect someone else has put it there for you?

But for the woman who crafted him from pain like clay.

Enough of that. I tend to get foolish and embarrassing.

You might want to know a little more about me, instead: I am currently fighting in the war against the Alderaanians. King Snoke has personally recommended me to the higher ranks as he seems to find me quite agreeable. He has favoured me ever since I was a child and I am very thankful for the opportunities he has presented me with.

The war has been raging for far too long. And I want you to know that people are out here, that I am there, to fight against the dangers of magic.

She will be proud of him.

If I don't die, if I will ever be fortunate enough to meet you, I would very much like to take part in your life. Travel will be easier without mages plundering the roadside and I would be glad to escort you into the city, maybe introduce you to King Snoke himself if he finds the time. I cannot imagine the war to go on for much longer. The enemy is growing desperate and careless. They are underestimating us.

For the destruction he will bring.

I can only hope that this letter will reach you one day. I have thought of the possibility that you might have a family on your own by now. Multiple siblings of mine, I have never known. Nevertheless, I urge you to consider an answer.

And Brendol will die screaming.

By the time he finishes reading, his tongue feels coated and dry. The raven's breath has deepened, so Hux assumes it might have fallen asleep, but when he leans over to check, the raven locks eyes with him instead. It understands, Hux thinks unquestioning as he tips his head back into the pillow and runs his hand soothingly across its feathered back.

All of this will be over soon.

"The General is dead!"

The voice echoes through the campsite and multiplies, until dozens of heads peak out of their tents, staring at the group of returning warriors. Beaten and bloody and grim, never truly leaving the battlefield even at home, maybe years later still. Some have lost limbs, some hang limply over their horses, some stare off into space trying to clean their eyes with how blue the sky is.

"The General is dead!"

Hux rides first, drenched in blood, his face hardened to stone.

The man screams louder, announcing it for everyone to hear. Bellowing, so it pierces Hux's mind and pins him into the feeling of pride. He tries not to smile.

"The General is dead!"

Long live the General.