

Choking on the ashes of his enemy

Von ArmitageHux

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 breath has 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 seizing 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.