THE STORY OF ORION.

My story begins in late December 2011, about a year and a half before my hatch. My father is living at Antwerp Zoo at the time and going through a sudden divorce from a pretty lady with whom he wanted to have young, but only produced unfertilized eggs. His lady-ex is much older than him and moving out to make room, both in the aviary and in his tender heart, for my mother, who is younger, in hope for more successful breeding. That you are reading my story tells you this plan worked out beautifully. I am a young EBV girl, born in the European captive breeding network EEP in 2013... I probably should have said that first.

My father is a captive-born male in his late 20s, very gentle and soft as kitten. Years ago when he was younger, he already had a young with someone at another location, but we don’t like to speak about it. He is a good father. My mother is a captive-born female from France in her mid 20s. I am her firstborn. Father is small in size and delicate, but mother is a giant. I am very much like her. She also has a curious condition known as partial leucism that causes parts of her plumage to be white instead of brown - it’s a symmetrical inherited thing, so I was told, and everybody is dying to find out what I look like as an adult. I am curious myself. So far I am all dark, as young EBVs should be. Now, where was I? That’s right, my parents...

Figure: When my parents first meet in December 2011, my father is terrified of my mother and insists in keeping a safety margin. By February of the following year he begins connecting the dots and figures her intimidating gestures are some sort of flirting. By March his fear of her is but a distant memory and my parents are deeply in love.
Before meeting father at Antwerp Zoo, my mother was living with another female as a pair for years, both ladies probably thought the other one is a male. For obvious reasons they did not make it beyond unfertilized eggs. So mother and me, we were both new to the baby business at my hatch and my father had two rookies to teach at once... he did a fabulous job, as you see. Females in my species tend to dominate their males. To make matters worse, my already giant mother developed an especially dominant and clumsy appearance while living with her female ex that scared the hell out of my tender father for their first weeks together: mother was being romantic, attempting to flirt and set out to seduce him; he was terrified of her intimidating gestures. It took him until late February of the following year to loosen up a little, read her not-so-subtle signs and build up courage to give into her courting. Long story short, after weeks of confusion about each other's intentions, my mother and father rushed their relationship from mildly attracted to each other to deeply in love, to nestbuilding, to mating, to more mating and finally to egg-laying - all within a few days in March. Their pair bond was great from there, the scientist says, but with so little time their first nest wasn't perfect when the egg came and fertilization didn't work out and all in all things were a bit too rushed in 2012. Their first breeding attempt failed and they had to wait one more year for me.

In early spring of the next year the time had come. My parents had again prepared a huge nest on the ground. They were flirting a bit less often than the previous year, but mating more passionately then, and my mother laid an enormous bright and fertilized egg in the nest one rainy night in mid March 2013. I was in that egg! Incubation went smooth, mother and father kept me safe and warm in my egg all throughout March and April until early May. I barely noticed the snow and freeze and rain, nor the burning sun out there from my cosy side of the shell.

54 days down the road of embryonic development and it had gotten positively cramped inside my egg, and boring too, and so I packed my belongings and decided to move out. Cracking that shell and gracefully propelling out sounded like an easy thing to do, but getting out of there was much tougher than I thought. My mother had wrapped me in a really thick package! It took me a whole day to work a little hole in the shell just large enough to stick my beak out and another full day to get all out. Father and mother were both helping me to hatch. They rolled the breaking egg around and nibbled off pieces of shell, even though I did most of the work. I was talking to them the whole time to give instructions and make sure nobody gets bored and leaves. Until then I was only hearing them and feeling their warmth through the shell, now with my head sticking out I could see them too... so cool! I had no idea I belong to such a great species. My mother, made of 100% clumsy, all of a sudden was acting gentle, while my timid father had discovered the sweet taste of leadership. It’s perhaps what all young parents go through - their first baby makes them whole new persons. On day 56 of my incubation, 05 May 2013, I finally crossed the line and left my shelled baby prison to start a new life on the outside. I became the first hatchling of my species at Antwerp Zoo in over 30 years and my proud parents’ first young. I was named Orion. I like my name.
When it took me some days to get out of my egg, everybody got a little worried I could be exhausted and tired after hatch, perhaps even weak. Suffice it to say, they were all wrong... I was dry, I was strong, I was agile, and I was excited to meet my family in person. My tiny head and body were covered in a fuzzy grey natal down that kept me both warm and perfectly camouflaged... as a cotton ball with eyes and a beak. Seriously, I was painfully cute as a hatchling - nature’s way of tricking everyone into being nice to me and feeding me lots. Mother and father [edit: mostly father] were feeding me beak-to-beak with regurgitated and kinda liquid meals immediately after hatch. Delicious! My mother had never fed a hatchling before and had to refine her feeding skills: What size of food fits into a baby? Where does it go in? How much does go in? So many puzzling questions on a young mother’s mind. A few times she was putting chunks of meat next to my face about the size of my head and waited in vain... and was surprised I wouldn’t eat. But she is a sweet mother who always tried her best and learned fast. Which brings me to my father, he is ama... breathtaking. He taught my mother all she needs to know. For feeding when I was very little, one of them was holding regurgitated meat and had the other one tear off small pieces for me. When I was a few days old and mother had learned the basics, my parents started to feed me separately. Then they were stepping on food and biting off little pieces for me. They gave me food many times a day, except when it was raining. Mother often gave me fluid too (she was not brilliant at regurgitating - don’t tell her!) and soon we found something for her she was really good at - cleaning the nest. And from there on she was on a mission: cleaning and cleaning and cleaning, sometimes cleaning away my food before I could grab it.
Figure: Me introducing myself to my parents the morning after hatch... as their baby and overlord for the next 120 or so days (top). My mother experimenting with food sizes, she is just one clue away from concluding how feeding is more than placing chunks of meat next to baby’s head (bottom left). My father (right in the photo) and me are teaching her the basics (bottom right).

Figure: Me being given food and fluid. My father is giving me regurgitated bites beak-to-beak while my mother is taking notes on baby-feeding in the background (left). My mother is often feeding me drops of fluid, you can see some on my beak (middle and right).
When I was still a ball of natal down, I needed help staying warm and dry, mostly dry. My mother and father shielded me against rain, let me hide deep in their feathers and sometimes made them shiver and tremble for me. That kept me snug on cold days and was fun. When there was very heavy rain, I wasn’t allowed to stick my head out and we didn’t eat either... all so my down does not get wet. And when the sun was burning down on our nest and I got a little hot, my parents shaded me. Because when wet, exposed to light or fed after midnight, cute fluffy things spawn little devils - no wait, that was something different. Anyway. When I was about 2 weeks old, I made first acquaintance with my limbs and started to crawl around a little, I was able to sit for short moments and play with the sticks on my nest. My natal down changed and I turned a little bald here and there, but just to grow a brown second down coat. That one was terribly unpleasant to pass through my skin, but came with a neat little ruff like my parents have. When I was about 20 days old, I was able to sit upright for longer moments. I was sometimes eating regurgitated leftovers from the nest all by myself and we tried first non-regurgitated food. Bringing ‘itchy’ to a whole new level, my dark juvunal plumage, the one with wing and flight feathers and all, began to torture me emerge when I was about 3 and a half weeks old. On day 26 I lost my egg tooth. Please let me know if you have seen it.

My mother and father protected me against the evils of the world while I was little - magpies and pigeons and a stray cat in our aviary didn’t stand a chance. I used to hear stories about my father being a softie and the first to flee. But not when he was with me! Then he was most protective, as two pigeon could confirm if we hadn’t eaten them. Feeding, harsh weather, intruders - my father took care of all difficult situations. Mother was mostly watching and learning. Just a few times my father got angry at me when I wasn’t listening. When I was about 4 weeks old, I was getting more mobile. I was crawling around across the nest and sometimes was left unattended by both my parents there, although they never went far. When I was 4 and a half weeks old, I was able to stand for short moments and soon later I had my mind set on walking around on the nest on my very own giant floppy babyfeet (another activity that looked much easier from afar!). When I was 5 and a half weeks old, I was eating my very first whole rodent with a little help from my father tearing its furry skin. I also learned how to speak vulture like the grownups then: greeting gesture and erecting feathers on the back when someone visits the nest. And I learned a new call to demand immediate feeding and express utter disapproval with the world in general if my parents did not respond instantaneously.
Figure: Me learning to speak *vulture* and practicing my greeting gestures with my father. He somewhat lost focus after the first 30 repetitions.

Figure: Me *versus* gravity.
When I was about 6 weeks old, I walked! On most shivering legs I walked a vast distance of 1.5 meters from the nest to a rodent meal. Soon my gait became more stable. I dreamt sweet dreams outside of the nest sleeping in the grass at night from time to time, which confused the hell out of my parents. Yes, I was a little rebel back then. When I was 7 weeks old, I was sunbathing like adults do. When I turned 50 (days, not years!), I had grown so large that only my head got sheltered by my father during rainfall, the rest of me didn’t fit under (we tried). But my juvenal plumage had grown and kept me dry and warm. I admit I went through a difficult phase then, with spunky and sassy and feisty episodes. Sometimes I got angry for no reason and had bad grumbling fits. My parents were patient with me. Mother was often quietly watching from a distance, father came running to make things better and help me through my rage. When I was 8 and a half weeks old, I conquered our pool and learned how to bath. Over the next weeks my dark juvenal plumage replaced the last patches of my baby down, also my flight feathers had all grown. I discovered running, hopping and leaping as means of more efficient spatial movement. I ate by myself and slept by myself. Just sometimes my father was still sharing food with me, though he was more interested in my pretty mother again by then.

I left home when I was 122 days old. In the wild, I would have fledged around that time too. I had some feathers and blood with DNA stolen from me when I left. The scientist (whom I asked to translate and write down all this... in case you were wondering) said I am a female, but nobody who knew me was doubting that anyway. When I left Antwerp Zoo, I had grown into a stunning dark beauty, surpassing my father in size and my mother in spunk. I moved into a large dating aviary at Planckendael Animal Park, 30 km south, where I now enjoy a carefree youth with many EBVs my age from other European zoos. My father’s lady-ex is living here too, sometimes we talk about him. I like it here. I think I will stay for some years and then move someplace calm to start a family. There are young males here who like me, some are handsome... but I don’t know yet whom I will choose, so far nobody seems as nice as my father. I haven’t seen my parents since I moved away, but I hear they are doing well and are working on a second young. Soon I will be celebrating my first anniversary on this side of the shell. It was a good decision to hatch... what an exciting first year this was!

PS: I am obliged to say that readers who wish to read about me in more scientific terms shall ask for the EEP HUSBANDRY GUIDELINES.