

Entry 02: Of those who are born in the flames

As told from the perspective of Vaelor Viator Inani

I was loading grain.

That is the honest beginning of this story. Not standing at some cosmic threshold, not reading omens in the dark between planes. Loading grain into a merchant's wagon at the edge of a small town whose name I have already forgotten, earning coin I did not particularly need, existing at a scale appropriate to what I had become.

The smoke came before the sound. That specific quality of smoke — not hearth smoke, not controlled burning — the kind that carries something urgent underneath it. Eight centuries of existing near the threshold between things had given me a sensitivity to wrongness that no amount of careful neutrality had managed to extinguish. A wildfire. North. Moving.

I knew the forest to the north. I had walked through it twice during my night watches. Dense. Old. The kind of forest that takes centuries to grow and hours to lose.

I told the merchant. He looked at the sky and said it seemed far enough. I told the farmhand loading alongside me. He shrugged and said someone would deal with it. I told three people in the market square with the particular calm authority of a man who has forgotten how to make urgency sound like urgency to people who have never had reason to feel it.

The problem with speaking like someone who has already seen the outcome is that it does not move people who have not. I have never learned to perform panic. I have only ever been present.

I went north alone.

By the time I reached the treeline the fire had already taken the upper canopy on the eastern edge. There was nothing to be done about that — I had known there was likely nothing to be done before I left, which is perhaps why nobody followed me. People only move toward hopeless situations when someone convinces them otherwise. I have never been convincing. I have only ever been correct.

I worked the perimeter for an hour. Broke firebreaks where I could. Directed what wildlife I encountered away from the advancing line. Kept moving. The fire was not intelligent but it was

thorough, and thoroughness in the absence of intelligence is often more dangerous than the alternative.

I was preparing to leave. The fire had taken what it was going to take and there was no meaningful intervention left available to a single man with a shovel and an old wanderer's pragmatism.

Then I heard it.

A sound underneath the fire. Not an animal sound — something structural. The specific crack of something under heat stress that has not yet given way. I have heard enough burning buildings to know the difference between wood failing and something else failing.

I followed the sound to a nest the size of a cart, built high in the fork of a burning oak. Already past saving. Around it, scattered on the ground below where the heat had sent them — eggs. Large. Owl-like eggs, though I had not seen one before. I reasoned it quickly enough. All of them broken. All of them already gone, contents visible and still in the firelight.

Except one.

One had fallen differently. Landed in a cradle of debris that had slowed its fall and held it at an angle. Cracked along one side but not through. Still intact. Still warm with something other than fire.

I looked at it for approximately three seconds.

Then I went in.

I do not remember the decision clearly. That is the honest account. I remember the assessment — egg intact, retrieval possible, window closing — and then I remember being inside the fire, and the sequence of events between those two points is not stored in any part of my memory that delivers clear images. Just heat. And the egg in my hands. And the knowledge that I was not going to drop it.

I came out the other side of the burning debris moving too slowly and on fire in several places simultaneously.

I rolled. I extinguished what could be extinguished. I lay on the ground for a period of time I cannot accurately estimate and held the egg against my chest where the armor had protected enough of me to still be functional.

When I sat up and assessed the damage the inventory was considerable. The left side of my face had gone wrong in ways I catalogued methodically and then set aside for later consideration. Several fingers on the left hand were no longer responding to instruction. Two toes on the right foot similarly absent from the conversation. The eye on the left side of my face was simply gone — not painful, which I understood to mean the nerve endings in that area had made their own pragmatic

decision.

The egg was unharmed.

I held it with what remained of my functional hands and walked south. Slowly. But steadily.

The egg took eleven days to hatch. I kept it warm against my body during that time, wrapping it in what clothing I could spare, sleeping in whatever shelter presented itself, continuing south once I had determined that a separate tribe of Owlkin resided three days further into the surviving forest.

I did not name the egg. I did not speak to it. I am not that kind of man.

On the eleventh night it moved. A small sound — something between a crack and a question. And then a pause, the way newborn things pause as if reconsidering the entire proposition of existing. And then he hatched.

The first thing he saw was my face.

What remained of my face.

I have thought about that moment many times since. Whether it left some mark on him. Whether being born into the sight of something that looks like I look now created some particular relationship with the difficult and the ruined that he carries without knowing its source.

I do not know. I am not a philosopher of imprinting. I am a man who was holding an egg.

I looked at him for a long moment. He looked back at me with the absolute attention of something that has just discovered that the world is real.

"*Hello*," I said. It was the first word I had spoken in eleven days.

He made a sound that was not yet language. I took it as acknowledgement.

I found the Owlkin settlement two days later, moving slower than I had planned on account of the toes. They received me with the particular wariness that communities develop when a damaged human arrives at their borders holding one of their young.

I explained what had happened with the economy of a man for whom speaking had become a mechanical exercise in precision rather than expression. I asked for nothing. I offered my services as a healer for as long as they required in exchange for teaching the hatchling what I could not — how to be an Owlkin. How to exist in the way his kind exists. The things a species passes down that have no words.

They agreed. I think they were not entirely sure what else to do with me.

I stayed for two years. I healed what I could heal among them. I watched the hatchling — Remnant, they named him eventually, a name I considered apt and did not comment on — learn to be what he was supposed to be. The language. The flight, when the wings came in properly. The particular Owl-in relationship with darkness and silence and the spaces between sounds.

He learned it all. He was exceptional at it. Occasionally he would look at me across the settlement with an expression I could not fully read and I would look back and then we would both look away and continue with what we were doing.

On the day I left, the elder of the settlement brought me the mask.

Crow-beaked. Dark. Old craftsmanship, built for function rather than ceremony. He said it was a Crow Brother's mask — for the ones who existed at the edge of the flock, neither fully in nor fully out, who kept watch in the places the rest did not go. He said I had earned it not through the fire but through the two years of quiet service after. The fire, he said, was just instinct. The two years was character.

I put it on. It fit as though it had been made for this specific absence of a face.

I thanked them. I said goodbye to Remnant with the brevity appropriate to a parting between people who will see each other again and both know it.

I walked south. Back to the in-between. Back to the work of being the right size for the world I had chosen to move through.

Remnant and I travel together now. He has never asked me the full story and I have never offered it. He knows the broad shape of things — everyone in the settlement knew, children talk, stories travel. But knowing the shape of a thing and understanding its weight are different propositions entirely.

Someday, he will ask the right question.

I will answer it honestly when he does.

Until then we walk. Him above, usually, on wings I watched grow in from nothing. Me below, on feet that work well enough, behind a mask that breathes easier than what it covers.

The world is full of burning things.

I have made my peace with that.

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