

Prompt: Character Journey

Subprompt: Charmed (Tenet) & Memory (Alula)

Characters: CITIZEN-00188 (Tenet) & STANDARD-00344 (Alula)

Word Count: 1840

Bated Breath

After the incredibly uncomfortable and demoralizing visit to his childhood village and childhood rival's storefront, Tenet finally had the last piece he needed. Held in the pocket of the bag he'd been given for the egg was a glimmering kyanite that stood strong and tall not unlike his own horn. All Tenet could do was hope he had made the right choice. The instructions were vague, after all; he figured there was only one way to find out if his selected gem worked.

Right now, it wasn't safe to check. No, he had to get far away from the village, all the way to one of his camps. It'd take at least another day of travel, but he was used to it (even if the bag was heavier than he was used to carrying). He was big, he was strong, he was a *survivor*, and his egg would be, too. His son, or daughter, or anything in-between or beyond, would survive. He wouldn't raise a weak child.

The harsh veldt sun shone down on Tenet as he walked through the tall grasses, dry and burned to a golden yellow from the heat. Dirt and dust was kicked up each time he took a step, but he would not be stopped easily. He was on a mission, and no amount of heat would stop him; his thin coat was adapted to the sun, and his large ears helped vent excess heat. Despite it being most of what he knew, his tail flicked with impatience. It was only somewhat past noon, sunset still *hours* away, and he was hungry. No prey would be this close to the village, so he'd have to wait a while for any to be available... he might've been able to *buy* some food, if Ros hadn't taken the last of his kouneen, but it was too late for that. His egg was more important anyway.

...

A few quiet hours of walking passed. Tenet's ears flicked at every sound, but he never saw anything larger than a rat scurrying through the brush, and half of the time it was just the wind. Full grown hares were the smallest prey he'd hunt due to how large he was; anything smaller was not even remotely worth the effort. Wait a second... his egg is going to hatch soon. Is it going to need to eat immediately? What do Balikin even eat? He really hoped preparing baby food for whatever hatched from his egg didn't have dietary requirements as complex as the steps to hatch it... he could cook, sure, but he was pretty limited in *what* by the season. Any of the few plants he ate were always scavenged or foraged, never grown.

Tenet groaned softly to himself as he glanced down at the satchel, which was beginning to look worn. *Go figure*; it didn't look well-made to begin with. He'd have to toss it once his egg hatched and go back to tying the water jugs around his waist with a rope, or something of that sort. He'd figure it out... he always figured something out. Maybe he could save a bit of his next kill for his soon-to-be child instead of leaving it all to the scavengers. It was too bad he didn't have any strips of cloth to wrap it in... ugh. The bag was going to be thrown out anyway, staining it with blood won't matter. He'd just put the scraps in one of the outer pockets.

Finally, after what felt like far too long, he made it to one of his camps. He hadn't been there for a while, so it looked less like a camp and more like a pile of rubble surrounded by a few trees, but he recognized it. Taking in a deep sniff, he attempted to detect if anyone had been here recently... it smelled strongly of cheetah. Like one was still here... good, that at least solved the food problem for a short time. Hopefully.

Tenet lowered his head and inhaled again, then slowly stalked towards the 'rubble'. It wasn't rubble, but instead a collection of carefully collected and stacked stones that guarded the entrance to a large hole in the ground, acting as a half-underground burrow. Due to his size, digging a fully underground burrow was near impossible (as proven to himself just a few days ago when he made an underground nest for the egg). The rocks provided limited protection from rain but held against wind and heat, keeping the hole shaded and cooler than the

surroundings. There was a spring not too far from here (where he had gathered most of these rocks), and the trees offered some further shade. It was, overall, a very nice spot, and Tenet was glad he had set it up. It was no surprise something else had taken residence in it while he was gone; and something as small as a cheetah was welcome. The beast made a poor choice in resting here instead of in a tree.

Slowly, Tenet stalked into the entrance of the den. It was almost impossible for something of his size and color to sneak, but he wanted to be quiet in case of the best case scenario: the cheetah was asleep. Fortunately, it was— the beast was lazing about, presumably waiting for dusk when more prey would be out grazing. That was its final mistake, as Tenet lunged forward with the ferocity of the apex predator he was, grabbed the cheetah, and bit the back of its neck, severing the spinal cord before it had the chance to comprehend what was happening. He dragged the body outside so blood didn't pool in the den, then began eating his share. One cheetah wasn't nearly enough for him, but it'd suffice until he could go hunting again; the meat of another predator was rough and stringy.

Once he'd eaten the majority of the carcass, save for a small cut he'd separated with his claws and placed in the satchel's outer pockets for the egg, Tenet scattered the bones further out so the scavengers wouldn't bother him as much. He was hungry enough to be tempted to crack them for marrow, but they were too small for him to bother. No, the hyenas could have it— but if they came by too quickly, maybe he could have hyena. Or, maybe not; it depended on the size of the pack. Even he wasn't keen on fighting more than four or so at once. A pack of kirunhounds beat a pack of hyenas every time, but a lone kirunhound? Not worth it.

Bones scattered, Tenet licked the blood off his chops and returned to the den. There, he removed the satchel from himself and set it gently on the ground, then flipped it open. Carefully, he lifted the egg, its mud-clay-gravel casing, and the tiny nest it rested on out of the satchel and placed it all on the ground of the den snugly against a wall. Tenet hesitated for a long moment as he lay before the egg,

unsure if he was really ready. He didn't know how quickly the egg would hatch once given a gem, or if it would accept the kyanite at all.

Grunting to himself, Tenet steeled his wits. He flipped open the pouch of the satchel and retrieved the kyanite, holding the little blue crystal between two of his claws. It no longer shone due to the shade of the den, but Tenet knew what it looked like in the sun. With a heavy sigh of anticipation, Tenet reached his paw out, placed the gem on top of his egg, retracted his paw to lay like a misshapen loaf of bread, and waited. He watched, waiting for anything to happen... another beep, a sign of movement, anything. But nothing happened for a long minute.

Tenet began to worry. Had he done something wrong? Accidentally skipped a step, or done it incorrectly? What if dirt wasn't actually a proper element for the egg? What if the gem was unacceptable? Just as Tenet's worries began to fester, the egg changed. The kyanite began to glow brilliantly blue, and the egg slowly glowed to match. The clay shell around it warped and shifted to cover the exterior in its entirety, then gradually began to glow blue as well. Tenet stared wide-eyed as the glowing egg began to crack, as tiny claws scrabbled the inside of the shell and began to break it apart. The eggshell splintered as the form inside stretched outwards, freeing itself from its casing.

The little creature that now sat before Tenet was a strange chimera of a beast, not unlike her adoptive father. Her likeness to her *adoptive* father was nearly uncanny... perhaps that is what was meant by personal touch. She was covered in a thin coat of soft fuzzy fur that became almost imperceptibly thin on her face, which was snakelike with a rounded snout and visible heat pits. Two little horns jutted out from her forehead, currently small and not yet fully grown, and each of her two small ears were tipped by a large feather. Her arms were large batlike wings and her legs birdlike talons, while her tail was long and tipped with a large pointed fin. She was primarily light purple, but had black stripes bordering deeper purple markings like her father, as well as a black mask marking. A scale patch ran from her chin to her chest, bright teal in color, matching the thicker scales on the fronts of her feet in addition to her claws and horns.

Her eyes were bright and focused, locked onto Tenet. Briefly, a teal tongue flicked out like a snake as the tiny creature shifted, unsure of anything in the world. At present, fresh from the egg, she looked *incredibly* pathetic, soaked in amniotic fluid that made her fur bundle and her feathers hang. The vague parental instincts within Tenet told him she was cold, so he inched forward and reached his long neck towards the little hatchling to clean the amniotic fluid off of her. It was cold— and while the heat outside was torturous, it'd be beyond horrible if his daughter died of hypothermia. Tenet shifted to hold her close in a one-armed hug as he cleaned her, giving her his own body heat as he mulled over what to say.

"Alula," he finally decided, his gruff voice reaching a softness even he did not know was possible, "Your name is Alula, and you are my daughter. You will survive. You will be the strongest you can be. I will raise you better than they raised me," he rumbled, still holding her close. "I promise."

The avian-mammalian-reptilian creature in his arms chirped obliviously, but nestled her head closer to the soft, warm creature speaking to her. Alula couldn't yet fully understand language, but she understood that this purple creature was her father, and that she should stay close to him. She only needed instincts to know that.