

Prologue

The tall, wild grass swayed in the easy afternoon breeze and there was a stirring stillness to the lands. Not because there was no sound. The wind and grass were evidence of the fact there was plenty to be heard. It was what lay behind the soft sound of wind combing through the foliage. There were no birds chirping, no animals calling out... just the grass and its wind-swept song. In the jungle, this happened often, and all the citizens of this particular kingdom knew what it meant when the birdsong went without being heard. Something was being hunted, and it was more than likely that both predator and prey knew the event was inevitable.

The lioness roared from her crouched position, lunging for her objective. It was difficult to call them prey; lions did not often hunt hyenas. But a cub of the pride had been lost to the pack of dogs, and the natural order of things had to be reestablished. But against so many, it was precarious for the lone lioness to attack.

Catching the pack unawares, she was afforded the chance to attack several hyenas. With the wisdom gained from seasons past, the lioness knew better than to focus her attack on one target for too long. She slashed with her paws, scoring a bite on the left hindquarter of one of the bigger hyenas. The female whelped in pain. She had not been killed, but the dog's ability to run had been compromised.

Turning to find her escape, the lioness ran, the hyenas quickly changing direction in order to give chase. Running out of the patch of wild grass, the lioness was completely exposed and knew she could not outrun her pursuers. She set her eyes on one lone tree in the distance and ran her fastest. She never looked back, but she could hear the panting cackle of the hyenas drawing closer.

With the tree some eighty meters away, the lioness breathed easier as her closest pursuer fell to the ground, rolling to its death; the stone that struck its skull rolled free of the carcass, and three of the hyenas stopped to investigate the matter.

Aneke leapt from the tree, hurling her spear that hissed upon the wind as it passed over the head of the lioness, plunging into the chest of a hyena.

The force of the throw nearly carried the weapon through the body of the hyena, but it fell to its immediate death nonetheless.

"You struck well, Sister," Aneke said softly, lifting her hand to touch against the side of the lioness as it passed by her. "And at the moment, these fools feel their numbers give them power. Perhaps we should show them the error of their ways, eh?"

"You may have this one," Aneke huffed, quickly stepping to her left to avoid a charging bite. The tall, slender woman, using her right hand to usher the charging hyena by her, stepped into a lunging attack, the heel of her left hand smacking against the snout of another charging animal. The sound of bones breaking preceded one last yelp from the dog as it fell to the ground.

The woman closed her eyes as she continued her attack. She quickly became the wind; the attacking animals were her field of grass. She moved in and around them, between them... and when she chose to... she moved through them! Her hand strikes were fast and precise; one separating a leg from its socket, another stopped a heart, a third crushed a diaphragm. Her kick was powerful, sounding like thunder as it shattered a skull. Her fourth strike produced the fourth carcass, joining the two the lioness provided. The hyenas didn't require any further argumentation, and opted to leave the debate altogether. Aneke flashed a bright smile, moving her long, thin, gray and red braids out of her face.

"They are fewer in number... but they are fools no more, eh?"

Aneke moved to retrieve her spear, but stopped when the lioness walked by her, brushing her body against the woman's leg.

"If that is your wish, Sister," Aneke declared, her head turning slightly as she heard someone approaching. When the lioness turned to see what it was, Aneke scratched the top of the lioness' head. "No, he is one of mine." Aneke turned to face the young man, a look of confusion and concern on her face. "And he does not normally run this fast."

"My Queen!" Wian huffed. He was not spent, but it was clear he was giving his best effort to reach Aneke.

"You have been taught much better than that, Wian," she stated. "No respect for the lands of our friends, and little regard for what that trail of dust will do when our friends above our heads look down and see it."

"Forgive me, my Queen, but the Prince has returned. *Eagle* is back!"

With a slight nod, Aneke replied, “That is indeed a pressing cause for haste, eh? Fine, I am done here. Take hold of me, Spearman.”

Wian took a long stride to move closer and take hold of the offered hand. The moment physical contact was made, Aneke closed her eyes and felt the wind blowing around her. Applying her talent, the wind was soon blowing with and through her. In an instant, the Queen of the Talmanjahr – and her Spearman – was gone. The lioness growled at the exit of her friend, and started her way back to the pride.