

The old Grand-Duke

written by Gabriel Makhoul

His name was Isetu, his beard grey as ash and his eyes green as the branches of a pine tree.

You could have considered him ancient ten years ago or, even thirty years ago you would call him old. But, the truth is that he is -or he was- the mighty Grand Duke of Heim.

He cherished the memory of the old days, when people called him leader and they loved him. His rulership has been stolen. The Grand-Duchy was attacked and defeated by the Empire of Apophiria and declared a province.

From then on, the people of Heim lived in tyranny.

Isetu looked into the deep chasm before him, how could he get away? Being stuck in a tiny chamber cut into the edge of a mountain and guarded by a wolf the size of an ox for ten years doesn't exactly sharpen your senses even less your skill in escaping from prison.

The little old man almost fell down, for he was surprised by the sound of snoring behind him Managarmr was asleep! The Moon Wolf was sleeping!

Now was his chance! But how to not wake Managarmr up? He probably would wake up if the old man just stepped in the other room, but he risked and stepped into the room, praying that the Moon Wolf doesn't wake up.

Isetu recalled trying to escape about forty years ago - he had almost got ripped into a dozen pieces.

He already was at the other side of the room, right next to the gate, when the beast lying on the floor stood up on all fours and growled at the potential food. The old man pulled at the handle of the door. It opened! He ran through (though at his age it looked like limping, not running) the gate, entering the Great Cavern; the foul central cave of the prison. It was a cone shaped room with two twisting staircases built in the stone walls, each lined with steel gates of many cells filled with people Isetu could not save. His "special" room was at the very bottom, in the place where both staircases joined.

"I am finally free!" Isetu muttered, his grin revealing something you could call teeth if you were really optimistic.

He started crawling up the steep staircase. It did not take as short a time as

he had hoped. I am getting old, he thought. After a not-so-short time of climbing the stairs, he finally saw the exit - a hole in the wall.

This was, however a hole in the wall with a huge snake coiled around it. This was the only other guard of the prison, besides the Moon Wolf. The serpent was a good twelve metres long and had scales the colour of oak bark. The vile green of its unblinking eyes seemed eager to kill. The reptile started slithering along the ground, smelling the air with its tongue, hissing.

The old man remained calm. His long life had taught him how to be completely calm. The serpent's coiling body was coming closer. Isetu was still calm. The colossal snake opened its maw, eager to devour the little piece of meat that seemed willing to be eaten.

The elder then ripped a wooden pole with a torch at its end from the wall of the cave and hit the gargantuan reptile in the head with surprising strength. The snake was paralysed by the sudden attack. It fell on the ground. But it was not a weak creature. The serpent started to coil around the old man... Thwack! Isetu again hit it with the wooden pole, directly between its eyes, now with the burning end. The fiend hissed, irritated. It crawled down the stairs, hoping that its "food" wouldn't follow it.

Isetu extinguished the burning stick, and leaned on it. The light from outside did not hurt his eyes because the prison was in a deep forest. He remembered that he was hungry, after having eaten almost nothing in prison.

For a few weeks, he lived in the woods as a hermit, drinking from streams and eating roots and berries, he even hunted, but only if it was necessary. Then, one day, when he was fully used to the outside world after his long imprisonment, he left the grove and looked around. On the top of a mountain above a walled city in the distance stood a tall silver tower, clean as if it was made yesterday. But the city was untidy and grim. Drawing closer, The old man's head filled with the blurred memories of the capital of his land, Linn. But now, the city was less merry than he remembered it, as the people were walking in straight lines, without talking and dozens of armoured guards were everywhere.

"My country...my land..." He whispered woefully. But then a wide smile appeared on his toothless mouth. "But soon, it will again be free," he reminded himself with a hopeful whisper.

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