

Under the Savannah Stars

A Flash Fiction Prequel to *Unicorn Tracks*

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I COVERED MY EYES as sharp stones nicked my face and neck. Oswe didn't even turn as he galloped down the riverbed, his horse churning up a spray of mud and loose gravel. My mare squealed and tossed her ebony mane. Elikia was as ready to start the hunt as I was and didn't like being left behind.

Brushing the dirt from my face, I scanned the riverbanks, looking for any clue that might help me figure out what direction Tumelo had taken. Oswe had chosen speed over detail, probably thinking that my cousin wouldn't risk getting lost by venturing far from the river, but I knew Tumelo better than he did. He might spend most of his time in his office these days, puffing a cloud of cigar smoke that would rival a forest fire, but Tumelo knew the savannah. He wouldn't part with a single copper of the prize money he'd promised unless we had truly earned it.

I sighed. This whole contest was insane; a final test to determine who was the best tracker under the Nazwimbe stars. Or at least, who was the best tracker in Tumelo's employ, which made tracking him down like a beast somewhat ironic.

Scowling, I nudged Elikia forward into the shallow river one step at a time. I didn't think Tumelo would follow the river for long. It was too easy and my cousin would want to show all of us that his skills hadn't rusted.

The river's end was the starting point, but infinite directions spanned out around us. Elikia's ears swivelled back and forth then focused on something to the left. Her senses were better than mine and I knew she was listening for Brekna, Tumelo's boisterous young stallion. My eyes scanned an invisible line from the tips of her ears to the river's sunbaked bank. I squinted against the sun. Something long and black wound around a sapling's branch, fluttering in the gentle breeze.

We waded to the river's edge. I unwound a shiny, midnight black hair. It was too long to belong to a zebra or an onyx and too fine for a manticore. There were no visible prints immediately atop the bank. I dismounted and crouched, running my fingers over the brown grass. Faint hoof-prints formed a trail across the dry earth, leading away from the river.

I smiled and mounted up again, then urged Elikia into a trot. By the time he realized how much his haste had cost him, Oswe would be far behind and the victory – and the prize – would be mine.

Elikia stopped so suddenly I nearly flew over her head. My stomach slammed against the saddle's high pommel and the impact snapped my neck back. As I struggled to catch my breath, my mare jogged on the spot, stamping her hooves and snorting. I listened to the sounds around us, but I could only hear the casual chatter of the birds. The great cats wouldn't hunt at mid-day. The lions, chimeras and cheetahs of the flat lands would bask in the cool shade of the sparse trees until the evening haze would allow them to move unseen as they ambushed their prey.

I snapped my legs against Elikia's sides, ordering her forward. The mare burst into an uneasy canter, taking two steps sideways for every forward stride. Then she stopped again, planting her feet this time and trying to spin around. I opened my mouth to shout at her, but a scream pierced the silence instead. I couldn't see anyone but the scream sounded again, seeming to come from a small enclave of trees in the distance.

It was probably a caladrius making those noises, as the birds were known to imitate humans to scare predators away. I glanced down at Tumelo's fading tracks. If I went to investigate, I might lose too much time.

But on the off chance there was a person out here ... Groaning, I pulled my

rifle over my shoulder and braced it under my arm. Then, I galloped towards the oasis.

At the edge of the little oasis, I dismounted. If there really was a person inside, pitted against a deadly predator, then the last thing I wanted was to drag my skittish horse into the fray with me. Parting the trees with the butt of my gun, I glanced around and my heart dropped.

A small figure huddled halfway up a sapling baobab. He sat with his back pressed up against the tree's trunk, his knees hugged to his bony chest. At the base of the tree, one of the biggest female grootslangs I'd ever seen wrapped her python coils around the baobab's trunk. Her elephant head rose nearly the height of the scared boy, as she used her tusks to ram the tree. Each tusk was the length of my forearm and as sharp as a machete.

The gun shook in my hands. I'd been working as a guide for nearly a year, and in all that time, never had to fire the rifle I carried on my back. I always found some way to get away and I avoided the savannah at dusk when the predators were at their most active. But the boy ... I recognized him. He worked as Oswe's personal servant. Darweshi cleaned the tracker's cabin, hauled water from the river and occasionally accompanied him on rides, climbing the trees to scout ahead ... My blood boiled at the thought. The boy must have been trailing Tumelo, waiting for the right time to alert Oswe.

And now, it was falling to me to save him.

Everyone knew to run when you saw a grootslang. With their heavy serpent's bodies, the creatures were slow moving on land and generally preferred to hunt in the water. In the tree, though, Darweshi was the creature's captive. And from the line of saliva dropped from the grootslang's fangs, she knew it too.

I scanned the oasis, looking desperately for something I could use to distract her. The boy screamed again, as the creature's tusks scraped the bark inches from his feet. He couldn't climb higher. The higher branches were slim and new. They would never hold his weight.

My eyes stopped on a fallen log, half-covered with moss and rot. Grootslangs had poor vision and they followed motion. If I could push it into the water, I might be able to trick her into thinking it was a crocodile – a meal far more worth her time.

Without stopping to think further, I raced to the edge of the pond. The grootslang's head whipped around. But the sight of my skinny frame wasn't enough to deter her from a prize that seemed guaranteed and she turned almost immediately back to the boy in the trees. I sank into the mud next to the log and pushed it forward with all my strength. It didn't budge. I turned around and tried to kick it with my legs. The mud around it making a sucking noise and bubbles of sludge burst at the surface, but the log remained in place.

Biting my lip, I stripped off my tunic and jumped into the water. The cold should have been refreshing, but the splash chilled me to the core with fear. *Never get in the water.* We were all taught that. *Never get in the water with predators you can't see ...* But I had to get a better angle. The grootslang rammed her head into the trunk again and the leaves around the boy fell to the ground as he whimpered.

I grabbed onto a half-dead branch protruding from the dead wood and pulled with all my strength. The log rolled into the water with a mighty splash.

As I scrambled out of the water, the grootslang let go of the tree and slithered into the pond. I sagged on the ground with relief. And a moment later, a small, brown hand held my dirty tunic out to me. I used it to wipe the water from my eyes.

“Thank you,” Darweshi said softly, sitting beside me as we watched the

grootslang strike the log then wrap her enormous body around it.

I nodded, shivering as the breeze cooled the water dripping down my back.

“You’re going to lose now aren’t you? Tumelo’s contest?” he asked, frowning. “Oswie doesn’t deserve to win.”

I looked at him sidelong, trying to swallow my disappointment. The prize money would have paid for new riding boots and I needed them. “Oswie pays you. You want him to lose out on the money?”

Darweshi jerked his head towards the grootslang, which was desperately trying to wrap her jaws around the log. “He wouldn’t have come.”

I sighed and looked out across the oasis. A few caladrius had landed in the trees and started preening their blue and grey feathers. Oswie would never let me live my loss down, even if I had saved his servant. Darweshi slipped his hand into mine and squeezed.

I’d have to settle for being the ‘second best tracker under the Nazwimbe stars.’ I could live with that.

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