

Cheetahs

...The Maronga Tree and Beyond...

Once upon a time, there lived in a valley hidden deep in the African Bush, two fine and powerful cheetahs. Alaya was slender and sleek, a female, not quite a year old, with a delicate, chiselled head, rich brown eyes, long, elegant limbs and a bright, enquiring mind. She liked to shelter away from the raw heat of the midday sun high up amongst the white blossom of the Maronga tree.... Waiting, watching... listening... occasionally raising her head to sniff the air as the scent of a passing visitor or potential prey wafted past on the warm breeze. Mumbuka, a large, dominant male, was broader in the head than Alaya, stronger in the jaw and more confident in spirit...his lengthy, muscular body was a formidable match for any lion and his roar, when summoned, would bring silence over the plain. Mumbuka enjoyed the shade of the tall bull rushes that grew near to the watering hole - and was always careful to keep his brightly marked body low to the ground so as to remain invisible to the outside world.

Alaya admired Mumbuka for his strength and wisdom. He always knew where to find the best prey and never failed to make a kill should he need to. She loved his confidence and his power... was excited by his charisma and above all felt safe in his presence. Mumbuka on the other hand, thought Alaya to be very beautiful, in spirit as well as bodily form and he was happy to have her accompany him on his journeys to and from the watering hole or to find food or shade.

As the long summer evenings closed in and the great orange sun began to sink behind the mountain range, Alaya would slip down from her perch in the Maronga tree and begin to playfully tease her friend. Crouching low to the ground, she would creep up on Mumbuka and playfully roll over in front of him, daring him to pounce...Slowly, he would rouse out of his slumber and although did not often take up her offer of a game, would toss his head loftily in an invitation to follow and together they would lope off into the twilight in search of prey, never returning without reward. Mumbuka always steadily and confidently led the way, his years of experience meant he knew which paths were safe to tread, where no poisonous snakes were likely to rear their deathly heads under their padded feet. He knew which waterholes were good to drink from and where 'cheetah territory' ended and 'lion territory' began – Mumbuka carried an immense wisdom and this filled Alaya with awe and wonder.

A few years passed in this way, the two animals became closer, enjoyed many good times together and never ventured far from each other's sides. Alaya now had grown confident and strong, could hunt successfully on her own and find her way back to the Maronga tree each night without Mumbuka. She had fully matured and.... soon to come, was the greatest and most important time of her life.

As the hot, summer days passed, Alaya found herself growing more and more tired; she found it difficult to summon the energy to hunt anymore...her tummy felt heavier somehow and she no longer played cheekily in front of Mumbuka like a youngster... deep inside her she was carrying a precious and heavy load...each day

growing bigger and stronger ...and soon would be a new cub's time to enter the world. Mumbuka stayed close to Alaya at this time and brought food back to her tree each night...he watched and waited.. fretted and fussed, listened and paced.... eager to see the day when he would meet his new baby.

One evening, as the sun once again completed its descent behind the distant mountain range and the moon rose steadily high into a dark and starlit sky, Alaya safely delivered a tiny..... though perfectly formed male cheetah cub - Amarula was to be his name.

With soft, fluffy ears and bright black eyes, the little cub blinked up at his parents as the moon swathed the Maronga tree in silver light. The two adult cheetahs gazed down at the tiny bundle, their hearts bursting with pride - a deep and intense love for their little baby had overcome them – a feeling that would never leave them now for as long as they both would live.

The little cub spent his early days curled up close against his mother's side, he soon grew sturdy and strong feeding on her rich milk and before long he began to venture out a little beyond his Maronga tree home. He quickly learned to run, skip and leap into the air, and to chase butterflies and even catch little mice sometimes. One of his favourite games was running and pouncing on his parents' tails or balancing high on top of his father's back and then toppling off whenever the large male arose to stretch.

Amarula loved this time with his parents but soon he wished for younger company too and to find this he had to venture a little further from home. Alaya accompanied him as he ran down to the bottom of the valley where another family of cheetahs lived. There Amarula played each day with two young cubs...both were slightly older than he, one female, one male but he adored them and tried desperately to copy their clever tricks and sneaky pounces, endlessly imitating them with cheeky roars and rude hisses. Amarula especially looked up to the boy cub 'Kulfi', who was strong, brave and tough, could run like the wind and already bring down a springbuck on his own, despite the fact he was only ten months old.

Amarula's mother was always close by, watching and smiling at her cub's antics and his father was never too far away either, usually out on the plains hunting, ensuring his family always had enough to eat.

As the months passed, Alaya, who was a good deal younger than her dear friend Mumbuka found herself yearning for wider experience of the world. She longed to venture further than the valley that was their home, began to desperately wonder what excitement lay just over the horizon, to see the sights and smell the air there, to know what she could learn from other animals who lived beyond the Maronga Tree. Mumbuka on the other hand, was completely content with his life as it was, he had already seen all the sights, heard other animals' stories and he did not dream the same dreams as his young friend Alaya. His wish was to continue lying in his cool bull rushes, to hunt each day his known territory and above all to enjoy precious time with his young cub. To remain only in the Maronga Tree valley for the rest of her life

would have frustrated and depressed Alaya and to follow endless unknown paths over the mountain range would have tired Mumbuka and made him unhappy.

The two cheetahs had come close together to bring Amarula into the world but now it was time for them to live out their different dreams, whilst always, of course, taking care of their little one. So, the mother and cub would live high up in their blossoming Maronga Tree, they would visit the valley and their friends down below and also sometimes venture beyond the mountain range to the distant plains to enjoy new and exciting adventures in unusual, magical places and meet different and interesting animals, whilst Mumbuka would stay forever close by to them, but lie low to the earth in the rushes and each night go hunting to bring back food for his baby.

Mumbuka's most special times would be those hours spent teaching his young cub all that he would need to know in order to become a fine, strong male cheetah - how to hide, stalk or pounce on prey, how to attract the best females and how to make a safe den in the rushes.

Amarula's home was with Alaya, for the most time perched up in the high branches but also he sometimes liked to lay low with Mumbuka in the tall grasses by the watering hole. He felt equally safe in both environments, for he had of course inherited characteristics of both parents but most of all he felt secure because he knew that both Alaya and Mumbuka loved him deeply and no matter what exciting changes life might bring him, his parents would never be far from his side, just there... to watch out for him, protect him from danger and to provide a plentiful supply of food, warmth, comfort and affection. Alaya and Mumbuka knew they had an important job to carry out in bringing up Amarula for they had a sense that one day

far in the future, when this little cub had grown big and strong, he would take on a very special task in the world... one for which he would need intelligence, wit and great courage. But for now, on this hot summer's afternoon, they were just enjoying watching him splash and tumble in the cool shallows of the watering hole before cunningly clawing his way up through the branches of the Maronga tree ...whatever and whoever lay beyond... could wait..... It was Amarula's time to play... a time to enjoy the beauty and majesty of his environment, the companionship of his friends.... and the love of his parents.....and this he did each day, whilst every evening from his treetop perch, as he looked out upon the orange sun turning the mountains to gold and the stars dappling the watering hole with silver Amarula felt content in his heart.

Sarah Rees, 2008

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