

Sa'ran's Love

Written by True Walker

Characters:

Sa'ran: known in *Othello* as Barbary, servant to the family of Venetian senator Brabantio

Mahaba: Sa'ran's paramour, servant to the family of First Senator

Desdemona: Brabantio's young daughter

“My mother had a maid called Barbary.

She was in love, and he she loved proved mad

And did forsake her. She had a song of willow,

An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune,

And she died singing it.”

- William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 4, Scene 3

“Barbary is the name of those without whom you could neither live nor prosper.”

- Toni Morrison, *Desdemona*, Scene 9

Scene One

A sparse room with a bed in the center, a small table next to it and a wooden chair in the corner.

A warm glow illuminates the space. Sa'ran is sitting up in bed wringing her hands or fidgeting in some other manner. Mahaba lays next to her, looking attentive but more relaxed.

Sa'ran: I am tired, Mahaba. This day was too long.

Mahaba: I understand, my love. Won't you lay beside me and sleep?

Sa'ran: I cannot. My body aches from exhaustion but my mind chatters away like the stares every morning back home.

Mahaba, *reaching a hand out to settle her fidgeting*: Why will it not quiet?

Sa'ran: The senator and his wife, the way they regard me each day with so little respect. It is demeaning, but then why would they respect me? I am nothing to them but garments laid out, beds made, rooms rid of any trace of dirt or imperfection. They do not even call me my true name. Only "Barbary," as if they cannot bother to differentiate me from others of the same place. And their daughter, the young Desdemona. She is placed in my care each day, and each day she seems to love me more. She believes we are friends, companions who are free to sit together by the canal, sharing sweets and conversation for as long as we please.

Mahaba nods to make clear he is still listening. Perhaps he sits up in bed. Sa'ran shakes his hand away as she picks up steam.

Sa'ran: She does not realize that I give her all the sweets because I am not permitted any.

Desdemona sees none of the way her parents treat me. She is unaware of my place in this world compared to her's; and I know that I cannot blame the child for her ignorance, but I must admit, I do resent her.

A short pause.

Mahaba: It is not fair, the way they treat you. Us. We are people just like them. Why do they refuse to see it?

Sa'ran: You are right, it is not fair. But it is a better life than the others who look like us.

Mahaba: Maybe, but it could be better still.

Sa'ran gives a questioning look.

Mahaba: Why do we not just leave, Sa'ran? You are tired of the demanding couple, the ignorant daughter. I sometimes think I cannot take another day of the senator yelling at me to fetch him water or fruit or whatever else he may desire. The man despises me, and I him.

Sa'ran: So you think that we should run away?

Mahaba: Yes.

Mahaba gets up, either on his knees on the bed or standing next to it.

Mahaba: Sa'ran, think of the life we could have. The two of us in a little house that I'll build in the countryside. No one to order us around, treat us like nothing. Maybe we could even find our way home.

Sa'ran: It sounds like a dream.

Mahaba: It could be real.

Sa'ran: It could. But too much would have to fall into place to make it real. If they found us, they would kill us. Anyone we saw along our way might as well. We could end up in a worse situation than we are already in.

Mahaba: I would protect you.

Sa'ran: And I you, but wanting to protect each other may not be enough. It is a beautiful dream, Mahaba, but an impossible one. I'm sorry.

Sa'ran settles into bed. Mahaba gets back into the bed, facing away from her. She lifts a hand and rests it on his shoulder, he places his hand over hers. The lights fade.

Scene Two

A lush garden setting, mid day. Sa'ran sits in the grass near a young girl, Desdemona, who is playing with a doll or another kind of toy.

Desdemona: Will you not play with me, Barbary? I always have a better time when we play together.

Sa'ran ticks slightly at the name but does nothing else to show her upset.

Sa'ran: Of course I will, child.

As she adjusts to get closer to Desdemona, she looks up momentarily and a piece of paper in a low-hanging tree branch catches her eye. She stands to go take it.

Sa'ran, to Desdemona: Just a moment dear, keep playing.

She walks to take down the note and stands to face the audience as she unfolds it. She reads the contents aloud but Desdemona does not hear.

Sa'ran: S, meet me in the garden tonight when your work is finished. Love, M.

Sa'ran re-folds the note, looking concerned. She quickly collects herself, concealing the note somewhere on her person. She goes back to Desdemona and begins to play with her. Lights go down.

Scene Three

The same garden, late at night. Sa'ran stands beneath the tree she found the note in, waiting. A moment later Mahaba enters, looking slightly frenzied. He moves to her quickly and takes both her hands.

Mahaba: My love, I have been thinking.

Sa'ran: Thinking?

Mahaba: Yes, thinking. I know that you said it would be too dangerous to run, but I feel it would be far more dangerous to stay. Maybe not to our lives, but to our souls, Sa'ran. My soul longs to be free of this place, these senators with their orders and their hatred. I cannot bear it any longer.

Sa'ran: What are you saying... really?

Mahaba: I am leaving Venice tomorrow night, and I beg you to come with me.

Sa'ran's face grows sad, she takes a deep breath, looking defeated and dropping Mahaba's hands on the exhale. Mahaba's demeanor changes, seeming to understand Sa'ran's answer from her actions.

Sa'ran: I am sorry, Mahaba. A piece of me wishes desperately to run with you. But a louder voice tells me it is not wise. I know that the life I live here is far from ideal, but I fear how much worse it could get.

Mahaba: Why are you letting your fear stop you?

Sa'ran: Because it is not an unfounded fear. We have both seen and heard of horrors done to our people. I will not subject myself to such possibilities; and I can bear even less the thought of witnessing something happen to you.

Mahaba: Sa'ran I cannot stay here.

Sa'ran, taking his hand again: Then don't. We have shared a beautiful story, Mahaba, but this is where our paths diverge.

Mahaba, growing emotional: I do not want to leave you.

Sa'ran: Nor I you. But I want more for the both of us to be content. I love you, Mahaba, so I will not ask you to stay. But I care for myself too, so I cannot go with you.

Mahaba: I love you, Sa'ran.

They kiss one last time. Mahaba turns to leave, exiting slower than he came in. Once he is gone, Sa'ran allows herself to fall apart. She drops to her knees as she begins to cry. She knows she will never see her love again.

Scene Four

Back in the bedroom, Sa'ran lays alone. She is propped up slightly but appears weaker than previous scenes. Desdemona has pulled the chair from the corner to be next to the bed and is sitting in it.

Sa'ran, singing: *The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree, Sing all a green willow. Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee, Sing willow, willow, willow.*

Sa'ran's voice fades, the melody trailing off.

Desdemona: Barbary? Are you alright?

Sa'ran, nearly incoherent: That is not... I am not... Why? I miss him... I should have... but no...

(This can also be improvised)

Desdemona, looking worried: I will fetch mother.

Desdemona exits.

Sa'ran sits up slightly. In a moment of clarity she begins to speak to the audience, herself, or both.

Sa'ran: My love has been gone now for two months. I know nothing of his whereabouts or if he lives even. I have felt so alone in recent days that I sometimes wish I had gone too. At least I would have died by his side, rather than here, alone in this room. But I cannot dwell, I made my choice. Now I hope only to see my love again on some other plain, where we can be truly free.

She lays back, reverting to her previous state. She begins to sing softly again.

Sa'ran: *The fresh streams ran by her and murmured her moans,*

Sing willow, willow, willow; Her salt tears fell from her, and softened the stones, Sing willow, willow, willow.

She starts the song again, still singing softly as the lights fade to black.

The End.