

The Belted Sona

by Alex Chighvinadze

Once upon a time, there was a little town. The only thing it was good for was having a rest, a nice supper and then going on your way to other towns. But if you stayed there too long, the narrow streets you liked so much would start to stifle you, and the doors of the colourful houses you were so happy to open became heavy and started to squeak.

Travellers often stayed in the city forever—they forgot who they were, where they had come from and which way they were heading. People did, however, remember well what a traveller needed to have a good rest. That is why the town had everything a traveller could need: comfortable hotels, relaxing sulphur baths and all kinds of food and drink.

But one of the taverns was very special. This tiny tavern belonged to Sona. She was called the Belted Sona, as she never took off her silver belt. The ornaments and figures on her belt told wonderful stories that you could never find in any book. Sona's tavern was the only one that children could visit at any time and buy any wholesome dish they liked.

There were even two additional low tables for animals. One of them stood right by the window. Now and then, you could see different species of animals sticking their heads out the open window. Even camels knew where to find Sona's tavern. As soon as a caravan halted for a break nearby, the camels would gallop at breakneck speed to the tavern, where blocks of salt and cold water awaited them in the open window. They would lick the salt with their scratchy tongues and observe Sona's various visitors with their grateful eyes.

Nobody quarrelled in the tavern, as everybody had great respect for Sona. Yet, if some impudent customer turned up, Sona would just cast a glance, and that was enough! The troublemaker would drop his head and ask for forgiveness. Besides Sona, one kinto named Papooka and a white cat called Darejana worked in the tavern. They fought with each other like cats and dogs. Papooka suffered from insomnia, while Darejana would mostly lie by the window, dozing. Papooka was bald, while Darejana was hairy. One of the visitors even thought she was a bear cub and could never understand how the cub of a white bear got into the town.

Even the menu was special in Sona's tavern—sturgeon with cherry sauce, fluffy plum pies, barberry ice cream and moist sponge cakes. And, all the dishes on the menu were arranged according to colour. For instance, what if you wanted an orange meal? Well, you could help yourself to pumpkin porridge and pancakes with orange marmalade.

Once, an old traveller visited Sona's tavern. Not a single innkeeper in town took him in, as he was covered with such a thick layer of dust that a mole could freely dig a tunnel on his back. That is why everyone thought he was a vagabond. The traveller's face looked young and old at the same time. It was hard to determine how to address him: boy, sir or old man... You could have easily made a mistake.

The traveller stood in the doorway of Sona's tavern, all eyes directed at him. Sona invited him to the best table in her tavern, Papooka ran and fetched him some cold water, and Darejana rubbed the traveller's legs with her furry body. The visitor gulped the water and ordered mushrooms seasoned with tarragon and almond, then ordered some cornelian cherry custard to top it off.

Before taking his leave, the traveller went up to Sona, stood still before her and started rummaging through his huge bag for such a long time that it seemed to Sona as if somebody was dragging and holding him back. At last, he pulled out a box painted all around with bright flowers, put it before Sona and said:

"It is a magic musical instrument made by old craftsmen—a hurdy-gurdy."

"Magic in what way?" asked Sona. The traveller scratched his head as if looking for the answer in his curly hair.

"When you hear the sound of this hurdy-gurdy, you understand what your genuine desire is."

Sona confidently replied, "I know very well what my desire is."

"Well, here's the handle," the traveller offered. "Get hold of it and start winding."

And Sona indeed wound the handle. It seemed as if the instrument emitted light instead of sound. And the sound filled all the gaps in the hearts of the customers present in the tavern. All of a sudden, a boy, who had had no appetite all month long, ordered some cherry soup and gulped it down in the twinkling of an eye. Since that magical day, Papooka, who could not stand to even look at Darejana before, now could not pass her without cuddling her. And Darejana responded with magnanimous patience.



As for Sona, she kept sitting and playing. She wanted to play on and on, as she loved seeing people happy most of all. And so, every evening Sona would fetch her hurdy-gurdy and start playing. Some customers started to dance, some hummed. Others somersaulted, but they never disturbed one another.

Competing taverns envied Sona terribly. Although her tavern had always been popular, now everyone coming through town rushed to Sona's tavern. It seemed as if the hurdy-gurdy spun a twinkling web in which you could lie softly, like a hammock. Upon hearing its soothing sound, people remembered where they had come from, where they were heading, and that they were expected by somebody somewhere. After leaving Sona's tavern, they went on their way with a firm step and bright eyes because, even if nobody is waiting for you, it is essential to never abandon your own path.

Kukula, one of the merchants, envied Sona most of all. He tried every instrument he could find for his tavern, making musicians play them and even learning to play the diplipito himself. He dropped prices and copied Sona's menu almost entirely, but people still preferred Sona's tavern. So, Kukula made up his mind to get hold of Sona's hurdy-gurdy at all costs, but when the sound of the hurdy-gurdy reached his ears, Kukula felt an irrepressible desire to hop along and went hopping all the way home.

But he returned to the tavern again. This time he was much better prepared. He had filled his ears with cotton wool to block the music. Then he waited for the right moment. When Sona was seeing her last customer off, Kukula grabbed the hurdy-gurdy, rushed out, jumped into a waiting carriage and cried at the coachman:

“Drive as fast as you can!”

When they looked for the whereabouts of the hurdy-gurdy in Sona's tavern, everyone guessed who could have stolen it. They rushed out. Nearby the tavern there was a carriage with a dozing coachman, who was dreaming that he was running after a turtle he could not catch up with since it had started moving just two seconds before him. So, his dream came true as soon as he woke up. The race started. The wheels of the carriage flashed by the corners of the street and almost caught up with Kukula, who was clutching the hurdy-gurdy so tightly as if it were the last toy in the world.

Kukula's carriage rushed across the bridge so fast that he could not hold on to his seat and fell right into the river. Sona and her friends stopped by the bridge. There was no sight of either Kukula or the hurdy-gurdy. Only bubbles appeared over the surface of the river. Sona unfastened her belt, took off her robe and dived straight into the river. A while passed, and Sona resurfaced. With one hand she was swimming, and with the other she was holding Kukula firmly by the nape of his neck until they reached the riverbank. Darejana jumped onto Kukula's chest, and Papooka started to breathe air into his lungs. Kukula coughed up some water and opened his eyes. But alas, he could not look straight into the eyes of his rescuers!

"I'm sorry," he murmured once pitifully, but nobody heard his voice. It was overpowered by the sweet sound of the hurdy-gurdy filling the air.

Even though a long time has passed since then, people say that even now, the river sometimes starts to sing the tunes of the hurdy-gurdy.