

# **Heart Song**

by

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Perched on the lichened rim of an old forest well, devouring the last rosy apple of the bygone summer, Juho Pyörni felt his heart strings come undone. Eeva Uosukainen, first-born of Urho, master of the midsummer dance, maestro and miller, was in love with another, and that beautiful green day when she wore a circlet of lily-of-the-valley, when sunlight played across her face, her attendants danced rings around a pole of stripped birch, and he first lay her down amidst the foaming underbrush, was long over. Juho sighed through a mouthful of fruit. It hurt his heart to think of it but hurt his pride more.

Easing a last piece of apple between his lips, Juho twisted at the waist and dropped the core into the well. He listened for its muffled splash. So that was love disposed of, he mused sourly. From that moment on, he would live only through his music.

The kantele rested alongside him on the wall of the well. Grazes to the sides of the chordophone lent the instrument an earthy

quality. Otherwise, it was a metaphysical box of tricks shined with a life's worth of elbow grease.

Juho swept up the instrument by the scruff of its neck, urged it onto his lap, anchored his boots on the iron earth and lengthened his spine. His eyelids felt heavy; he allowed them to close then started to play.

Pirjo worked her fingertips into the crevices between the mouldered stone and eased her body up. The murky water above her head was beginning to clear. She made out a smattering of stars, a great grey owl on the wing, northern lights streaking the sky like oiled rainbows...Her stomach flipped. Had it really been so long since that beautiful green day when she gored her finger on a spindle? She could still see it now, slipping from her fingers and falling into the depths of the well. Fearing her mother's reproof, she had been left with little choice but to climb down after it.

Tears formed in Pirjo's eyes; the element through which she climbed washed them away. She was part of a new world now. Part of Vanaheim. Her heart belonged to Mother Reija, and literally so, since the crone had eased it from her chest, dipped it, soaped it, buffed it free of grime, and stored it neatly away. If she missed the homeland then, such a feeling was only a ghost of emotion, Pirjo reminded herself. But that didn't stop the hole where her heart once hung from aching.

She surfaced unexpectedly. The air hurt her lungs like a blast of spice and she floundered, slipping back below. Suspended in the cool water, she imagined herself a babe tucked in amongst the vitalising fluid of the womb. It occurred to her just how sheltered her life had become in Vanaheim. She longed to sink back down to that world between worlds, twilight, meadowed, and in the shade of death. At the same time, she was struck by a snatch of kantele song gleaned from the arid air. How pure the instrument had sounded for that second or two when she was broke free of the water! How free

of lethargy and barren sentiment. No wonder Mother Reija had dispatched her to distil a measure of its sterilising quality, and with instructions to convey that prize to Vanaheim with the same care she might show ‘her own heart.’

The girl felt for the purse floating near her hip. Mother Reija was a task mistress but she outshone Pirjo’s biological mother, that wizen old shrew with the beating broom, day or night. Moreover, she had transformed Pirjo from a green girl with soft, maiden hands into a devotee of the household arts, unable to abide the dull or the tarnished but who took pleasure only in the swept, the scrubbed, the woven and the crystalline. Acknowledging her debt to Mother Reija was one incentive to resurface. Assuring the eventual safe return of her heart was another.

Emerging from the water with spidery bursts of movement, Pirjo ascended towards the circle of starlit sky. Water sluiced from her head and naked shoulders like jewels scattering. Blue-black locks suckered her face.

Set against the native chorus of the woodland, Juho's was a sophisticated lament. Notes bled off the strings, innocent at first then rising in mournful waves—and it was a song of aloneness, spooling from fingers that trembled in their pluck or press of strings. The sound fed under the boughs of great dark oaks, whispered through the needles of spruce and pine, ascended on an updraft to ruffle the breast of a cresting white-tailed eagle, and said to the ancient rocks, 'Love is caustic. Love is kind. Love is the unifying thread.'

Juho's eyes remained shut. So intent was he on the sanguine notes patterning his inner eyelids that he failed to notice a pair of hands crane up from inside the well, claw the mouldered stone and gain purchase. A slim leg crooked over the rim. Seconds later, a waif in a soaked, off-the-shoulder gown spilled over. She sat alongside Juho, one hand resting on the crook of the well's iron spit, the other cupping a purse at her hip.

Unnerved by the whoos of the owl or some subtle intuition, Juho left off playing. He opened his eyes and almost fell backwards into the well. Boots dancing like a hanging man's, he used the kantele as a counterweight, swung back onto his feet, swiped a sleeve across his brow and blinked stupidly at the stranger.

Stifling the urge to curse, he stuck out his hand. "Terve. Hi!"

Grey-gold lips pulled back from tiny stabbing teeth. Juho shuffled to put an arse's breadth between them; his uncle hooked perch with not dissimilar mouths through a hole in the ice in Kempeleenlahti bay.

The girl neither spoke nor shook his hand, a snub that made Juho hug the neck of his good, solid, dependable kantele and secretly berate the spitefulness of women.

"Forgive me if I disturbed your walk but I didn't expect anyone else to be out in the forest at this hour. It's late. Does your mother know you're out?" Juho waited. When the girl still refused

to speak, his gaze hardened. “It’s rude to sneak up, even ruder not to answer when spoken to.”

She nodded, tendrils of inky hair washing her face like pond weed.

“You know it’s rude to sneak up? No. Your mother knows you are out.”

An incline of the head.

“Are you mute?” Juho heard the brusqueness in his tone but every part of him felt weary. He had been abandoned by Eeva with her yolk-yellow hair and snowy, plump thighs. More importantly, his musical lament had been interrupted.

The girl parted her lips—those pincer teeth! Pity the poor mother who had tried to put that babe to the breast—and a vile squawk issued from her mouth. Eyes, infinite and sable like those of a seal cub, flicked up to meet his as if amused by the joke. Juho felt a fresh sting of resentment. He was not amused. Maybe the girl was simple.

His fingers twitched. He was eager to get back to his exorcism of love.

“Run along home, girl,” he growled, adding nastily, “There are wolves out here and bears that would eat you up.”

The girl maintained her daggered grin. She gestured lightly to the instrument, crooked against his chest like the body of a lover.

“You want me to play? This music is not meant for virgin ears.”

Again, the girl indicated the rosed belly of the instrument. Juho noticed the state of her hands, the callused knuckles and welts at the nail beds. He cringed inwardly. His fingers had also been toughened over time but by art not labour.

“The notes I conjure are not for farm girls. They are symphonies of retribution. They are the tears of kings.” His chest swelled and his eyes glazed agreeably.

A dark look crossed the girl's piscine features. Had he hit a nerve? Juho felt elated then quickly ashamed. Taking pleasure in confusing a simpleton? Abandonment *had* left him jaded!

He parted his lips to try a softer tact, but was freshly perplexed when the girl sucked in her cheeks then curtly raised her chin. Dipping a hoary hand into a purse at her hip, she produced a small metal pot, similar in shape to the one Juho and his father used to steam the filth from their nakedness at home. She offered it.

"A saunanpata? No thanks. I've a larger one at home."

She poked a finger at the pot.

"Inside?" He edged his nose to the rim, sniffed and threw the pot down. A black treacle oozed out of the mouth of the pot onto the ground. "What is *that*? Sugar syrup? Tar?" The girl's helpful nod grated. Her feeble-mindedness was confirmed when she retrieved more hidden treasure in the form of a goose feather.

Snatching the feather from her grip, Juho inspected it by the light of the swollen moon. Then he fattened his lips and blew the

feather out over the maw of the well. “Pretty, but my father’s yard is littered with them. Like a ryijy rug worked from dung and down.”

Pirjo watched the feather melt into the shadows of the well, her brow knitted. She was relieved to see the thing swallowed up by the depths that had fashioned it, especially since Mother Reija had bequeathed it to her all of those moons ago as a sign of ‘slovenliness on unworn bones.’ But the musician had plucked it from her hand like a cook tearing fistfuls from a fowl’s breast, disposed of it just as clinically, and so her relief was tinged with an element of regret. Like the round paljinsolki brooch securing the neck of her calico dress, it had pinioned her to both the world above and below. And now it was gone.

Pirjo pressed her tongue against her teeth. She refused to dwell on something as bucolic as sentimental attachment to a feather. Instead, she reached back inside the purse. Her fingers knocked against a glass vial that Mother Reija had placed in her

possession and then closed around the shapely wooden rod of the spindle.

“More treats?”

The musician eyed her, a corner of his mouth knotted up. Somewhere in the blackness, the owl whooed; it was a mocking call, reminiscent of a favoured sister’s taunts or a mother despairing. Pirjo clasped at the underside of her ribcage. She could not give up the spindle, reclaimed from Mother Reija in exchange for her heart, and with it, her need to spin words.

“Got something sinful in there?” The man’s pupils glinted like struck flints.

On instinct, Pirjo hooked the purse onto her opposite side.

The musician let his head fall forward, shook it and snorted. He glanced across at her. “Go away.” Readjusting the kantele on his knees, he let his hand hover above the strings. “Please go away,” he muttered.

What else could she coax him with? Pirjo counted off the few possessions that she owned: the slop of tar, the feather, the vial, the spindle, the coin...She lit up on the inside. Retrieving the coin, she offered it to man and moonlight. Its coruscations mirrored the grey-gold facets of her skin.

“Gold?” The musician reverted to a greedy-faced child.

“That’s a fine thing for a farm girl to carry on her person. Did you steal it?”

Pirjo shook her head vehemently. She had earned it in return for six months honest servitude to Mother Reija.

Nipping the coin from her hand with scissoring fingers, the musician bit it daintily then slipped it into a pocket of his short woollen jacket. He pursed his lips. “So what would you have me play?” Readjusting the kantele on his lap, he peered down his nose at her. “A lullaby? The devil’s polska?” The rolling movement of her hands made him grimace, but he soon caught on. “Continue from where I left off. Okay, you can share my anguish. But I warn

you, I hope it gives you nightmares because then I will have torn the thing out by the root and set it free into the world. Then I can sleep easy.”

Anguish? Nightmares? Pirjo cocked her head. Wasn't love the cleansing note in any opus?

Her befuddlement seemed to move the man at last. Head lolling as if to better observe the skilful interplay of his fingers, he plucked a bell-like toll from one of the strings. The air was instantly aquiver.

Pirjo joined her hands in prayer and pressed them to her breastbone, working them into the crook beneath the join. The music was breathtaking, even if she lacked the organ of emotion—and in all of the time she had spent in the dusky flaxen fields beneath the well, she had never thought to question her loss. But here in the woods, under a sky as broad, black and colourful as a child's chalk scrawl, she wondered if it was right that Mother Reija

should hold her heart to ransom? Hadn't she worked her fingers to the quick to appease the sacred crone?

For the first time since her ascent, Pirjo noticed the voice of the forest. Animals shuffled. Birds evacuated mid-slumber in lofty nests and pitted tree trunks. The great oaks creaked like tired old men. Wind moaned. Insects chattered amid the grasses or scuttled inside hollows. The owl called softly, a kiss of breath.

Pirjo's instinct was to repel the cacophony since it was unordered. But she also recognised a weird if symbiotic harmony, the din of the forest acting as the chords to the purifying ache of the kantele. Half-distracted by the fact, she drew the vial from the purse and pressed a thumb to the cork, about to lever it open. But then she paused. Why should she follow orders and distil the elixir that was the musician's song into the vial, only to convey it to Mother Reija and Vanaheim, which was, after all, just a half-world between the land of the living and Helheim, realm of the dead? If a heartless man could endure the mess of Life and still weave music that was

luminous as aprons dashed against a scrubbing stone and pegged in the trees to dry, maybe she could stitch herself back in amongst it.

Resting the vial on the rim of the well, Pirjo wondered how best to communicate her empathy to the ignorant musician. In the absence of words, she was restricted to an abstract ballet of the hands, or the feeble contents of her purse. But it occurred to her that he might appreciate some small offering of sustenance, and while it was part-gnawed, she had discovered just the thing in the well water.

She reached into the purse a last time, drew out the browning apple core and offered it. The musician's eyes stayed closed. She held the core under his nose and tried to speak to him in her non-voice.

The cider scent would not have been enough to rouse Juho from his depth of poignant sorrow. Far more offensive to mind and ear alike was the guttural squawk that pierced the night. He snapped his eyes

open and felt his jaw go slack at the sight of the apple core. The next instant, he threw aside the blood-hued kantele to scramble to a spot several paces away, where he doubled over, hands cupping his knees, choking on his breath.

“What the hell are you doing with that?” He glared at her, eyes red-rimmed and fear-soaked. “I threw it into the well just five minutes past and now you wave it up under my nose like a wizened witch levitating chickens for a crowd.” His exasperation cooked up to a white hot rage and he powered forward to stand, hands on hips, towering over her. Before she had struck him as mind-addled, but now he saw her as an embittered shrew.

“What are you going to conjure up next? Something that turns my abdominals into fat white worming meat for you to suckle?”

The girl clawed at the powdered brickwork in an effort to back away. But he would not have it. These succubuses with their pricked noses, mouths like springs, and salty effervescence, what right had they to feast on his fine, talented nature then leave him

hollow like a sack of bones? Shunting hard against her, dashing a small vial off the rim into the well in the process, he gripped her chin, forcing her eyes from the bottle's swift descent.

She was weaker then, her face flowing over and not just with tears. Cleansed with emotion, he saw such openness in the green-gold girl as if, with his words, he had forced his hands past the tiny razored teeth and ravelled out whatever it was that choked her. He faltered in his tirade. She was not the muse to his grief; that honour lay with Eeva. Yet she had seemingly materialised out of thin air and taunted him to play. Did it really make a difference if a mother had bled her womb in a sauna to produce Eeva or this gilded Fae with her mouthful of knives?

“Do you think the notes I tear and charm from the strings are trifles for silly girls? They are precious to me as all the years I gave to their perfection. Just as whatever it is you've kept hidden in that purse is dear as life itself.”

Her eyes ran wild, but before she could snatch for it, he had ripped the purse from her waist. Dancing away, he opened the drawstring and forced a hand inside.

“*This* is your cherished possession?” He held up the crude wooden spindle, wove it in and out of a gleam of moonlight. She darted at him, skirts sloshing at her ankles. Juho stretched higher on tiptoe, a hand pressed to his breastbone to control the pain of laughing. He reeled back his arm like a whaler readying his harpoon for the kill before launching his prize out into the air above the well. It dropped like a dead thing. Seconds later, it could be heard to hit the water with a soft splash.

“Who’s going to fetch your spindle now, girl?” Juho crowed.

Pirjo stared at the brambled fairy gate of the well. So it was gone, the one treasure that had mattered enough to her to give up her heart. As the spindle was returned to the cavernous halls of Vanaheim so she abandoned the idiotic fancy that she could ever

belong above ground again. The vial which had been her siphon to drain the sparkling music was also lost.

Her chest concaved. She drove her fingernails up into the hard pads of her palms.

Hands on hips, the musician threw back his head, laughing. “Why so glum? It’s never good to attach yourself to any one singular possession. Trust me, fish girl, they’ll always turn around and bite you.” He shrugged, a dead smile stitched into his lips. “My mother has more spindles, poking out from the woven reeds of her largest parekori basket. So forget that sour look. I’ll get you a better one. You should kiss me by way of thanks.”

Pirjo took a bite from the remnants of the apple. Before the musician had the chance to reel in his words, she leapt up onto the rim of the well, crouched down, grasped his hard head and put her mouth to his. Her tongue broke past his lips like a bobbin interlacing the weft and she fed on the vital essence of his song.

Then she crammed the apple in and broke away, sated by the roughness of the gesture if uncertain of its motive.

The musician stared at her. A bead of blood welled at a corner of his mouth where she must have nipped him. He choked on the pith of the fruit she had deposited, hacked in an effort to dislodge it from his throat and finally forced it down. Putting a finger to his lips, he traced the blood into a stain of a kiss. Hunger flickered in his pupils.

Standing, she balanced awkwardly on the rim of the well and edged away. The aged brick gave under one of her bare feet and she leapt back from the inner perimeter as a dislodged hunk fell away into the well. With her gaze darting between the advancing man and the secret depths just a pace away, Pirjo listened for a splash. Nothing reached her ears. Face draining to the colour of sage moss, she arched back as the brick came flying out from inside the well to land a few feet away.

The musician halted in his tracks. Two pools of viscous black, his eyes alone reacted to the numerous pairs of hands that thrust up and out from the well to claw the mouldered wall. Skittishly the horrors emerged, nine, ten of them, to sit clustered about the rim of the well, legs dangling over its unseen depths. They wore Tykkimyssy caps, the lace trims all dusty tatters poking out from beneath shaped silk domes prettied up with gone-off daisies. Their skin was gilt-flecked and mildewed. Their mouths and eyes were darned with crisscrossed black thread. In faded kirtle or darned smock, Mother Reija's handmaidens were between life and death like the strange, gold-green world they inhabited.

Pirjo stood rigid. Brittle fingers caressed her ankles then wormed towards her calves, waist and outstretched arms. She found herself buoyed up over the handmaidens' heads like a slain warrior. At the same time, her chest swelled of its own accord, as if ballooning with some purified quantity of air, her mouth craned open and she threw her useless voice towards the sky. The noise

was ear-splitting. But almost as if the godless squawk were being dethorned by the muscles in her throat, a softer note broke through. It deepened sweetly to a bell-like tone and then soared, voice of love's labour, voice of the kantele.

Mother Reija's handmaidens clawed her into the watery dark. Pirjo did not stop singing the whole way down.

Juho staggered back from the old forest well, abandoned anew. He waited for the water sprites to return, bundle up his young supple bones and drag him forcibly below. But he found himself disappointed and somewhat irked when the abduction did not take place.

His mind felt oddly hazy, or was that lazy? He was not entirely sure, but he was struck by just how cold it seemed now he was standing all alone in the depths of the forest at night time. There had been a wound, he remembered quite incidentally, a heart break or was it a nip to the mouth? He put his tongue to his lips and tasted blood there. Yes, that was it. The girl had bitten him in the throes of

desire. He was pleased by the fact, if drained of any inclination to dwell on it.

When his gaze wandered to the scuffed kantele at his feet, he squatted down and plucked a string. The note was coarse and he huffed. Why did he keep the useless unbeautiful old thing? He could do worse than heave it into the crooked well a couple of feet away. In fact that was exactly what he would do, he decided, dragging the instrument off the hard ground and propping it on the mouldered stone wall. He paused and caressed the kantele's womanly curves with a hand, conscious of their jagged edges. Careless to all but the instrument's spoilt nature and the biting cold, he tipped it in.

Juho pulled his kairalakki cap low. The black knit fitted snug about his ears as if the top of his skull had been dipped in tar. He did not feel inspired to do anything except sleep and he strode away, piped home to the bleak tune of an owl who-whooping.

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