

Greensleeves

Bartholomew led them out of Jonno's Gate area with an easy stride, the tile bearing Jonno's red handprint held high for all to see. The painted palm caught the morning light as it rose above the heads of the crowd—a quiet but unmistakable signal: new citizens were entering Berbia.

Although many folk lived in Berbia, Jonno's tile meant that the building was essentially yours. If you violated the "Handseal," it would not be a good day for you. Many residents simply squatted, but Jonno reserved the right to move people from buildings if they had not registered through him. He was open to pretty much anyone not here to cause discord. Although most of the buildings were far too decayed to be usable, a few structures remained somewhat intact. Jonno reserved those for Berbian use.

As they moved through the edge of Pratchet Square, people looked up from their work and conversations. Heads turned. Faces lit. Children pointed.

"Welcome!" someone called.

"Glad to have you!" shouted another.

Hands waved. Smiles bloomed.

A woman tending a stall of polished bone utensils clapped twice and nodded to Scar. A boy carrying a stack of kindling gave them a toothy grin, then ran ahead to spread the news.

The group—Scar, Witch Woman, Hank, Jake—walked together, their road-weariness momentarily forgotten. Even the dust on their clothes felt heavier under so many approving eyes. Scar’s stomach fluttered—not fear, but something close to it. Expectation. Being seen.

Bartholomew walked with a kind of practiced grace, nodding to merchants and bystanders alike as he narrated their route without ceremony.

“This here’s the Square—named for P.T. Pratchet. He stood with Jonno at the battle for the Gate. Set up the first permanent trade booth, right about where that cloth seller is now. Had a beautiful wit—people used to linger at his table just to hear his stories. He’s been gone a few years now, but the old-timers still talk about him like he just stepped away for a minute. His optimism... that never really left.”

They stepped fully into Pratchet Square, and the world seemed to widen.

The square was a sprawl of mismatched stalls and half-built lean-tos, layered smells—spiced tubers roasting over coals, old canvas warming in the sun, the sharpness of vinegar and leather, the clean iron scent of fresh water from the central pipe. The dirt beneath their feet was packed hard by years of footsteps, worn smooth in some places, cracked in others. Scar felt the way it shifted under her soles—unpredictable, alive.

Merchants shouted in overlapping voices, selling everything from dried roots to scavenged trinkets. Cloth banners flapped lazily from poles. Wind stirred up the dust, and someone cursed good-naturedly as their display toppled. A man beat a drum with a spoon, tightening its head. A woman near him adjusted the tuning on a stringed instrument made of shell, hard leather, catgut and wire; neither had started to play yet.

Adam stood by his tea stand, stirring something dark and fragrant in a battered pot. Steam rose in slow coils. He caught Bartholomew's eye and nodded—a greeting, and maybe a promise of tea later.

Varley's Puppetorium stood shuttered, its colourful tarps tied tight. The cheerful paint on its sign had faded to a sunbleached whisper: STORIES AND WONDERS FOR ALL AGES. Scar's gaze lingered, but no one was there. "Back after Morning Meeting," a sign read, as it fluttered in front of the curtain of its puppet-scale stage. Scar looked at the signs, wondering what they said. That little building looked very intriguing.

Minerva's booth—a wedge of striped cloth held up with tension and hope—was sealed, its curtain pinned with a scrap of parchment: Closed for Council. Leave questions in silence.

Then, without warning, the square shifted.

It wasn't a sound at first—it was the absence of others. Voices trailed off. The clatter softened. People turned, drawn by something none of them expected.

A woman, older than most, had opened a tin box at the edge of the market. Her hands moved with care. From the little box came a melody—soft, bright, impossibly delicate. Notes of silver and sadness floated into the morning air.

Scar stopped.

The tune poured out like sunlight after cloud: light and warm, but foreign. Impossible.

Inside the box, on a tiny spinning platform, stood a beautiful little doll in a lace dress. She turned slowly to the music, arms raised, face serene. Her gown shimmered faintly, dust and age woven into the fabric like memory. The doll spun, never faltering, caught in a dance older than anyone watching.

Just music, notes still hanging in the air.

The idea of music—not sung, not beaten or blown, but pulled from a box—was strange to the folk of the square. Even the buskers stood motionless. The moment held them like a breath.

They stood in a short silence, savouring that moment of ancient magic—the Before reaching out, but simply to be heard, a connection to the Before.

The melody wound down. The doll slowed. The final notes faded, trembling in the morning stillness.

Then, hesitantly, one of the buskers plucked a string—testing the air the way you test water with a toe. Another tapped a rhythm, softly at first, as if afraid to break whatever spell the little box had cast. A third joined with a cautious hum.

They weren't imitating. They were feeling for it.

The melody had come out of the tin like something impossible, and now—piece by piece—it began to exist again in the open, rebuilt by living hands. Halting. Uneven. But unmistakably beautiful.

Greensleeves.

Witch Woman murmured, “What marvellous toys they had.”

Scar didn’t speak. The doll in the box had stopped, but her mind hadn’t. Her thoughts spun in time with the fading tune. What else had they left behind—not to use, but to make such a nice moment?

Bartholomew broke the silence gently. “Come. The Heinlein Building isn’t far.”

They walked on, through the warm hush that followed wonder.

Behind them, the buskers found their courage again. One plucked the line a little cleaner. Another caught the rhythm and held it steady. The hum returned, thin at first, then surer—an old melody learning new throats.

Greensleeves—broken, tentative, and somehow still shining.

The crowd gave way without needing to be told. The group moved past the water cistern and the benches, past more stalls and sun-dried racks of meat and hides. They passed the edge of the square, where the shadows grew longer, and the noise grew soft again.

It didn’t take long for Hank and Jake to start in on Bartholomew.

“Is it true?” Hank asked, eyes wide. “About the ruins.”

Jake didn’t wait for permission. “Are there really ferals out there?”

Bartholomew kept his pace easy, like this was a question he'd been asked a hundred times and enjoyed every one. "There are ferals," he said. "Not everywhere. Not every day. But yes."

"What do you do?" Hank pressed. "If they come at you?"

Bartholomew glanced back at them, and he smiled—not mocking, just pleased to have an audience. He reached to his belt and lifted something small and plain from beside the tile-rope: a forked sling with worn leather and a pouch. He turned it in his hand for the boys to see.

"My coin shooter," he said.

Then he dug into a little side pouch and spilled a few heavy metal disks into his palm—round, cold, and scuffed. Some were copper-brown. Some were dull silver. Their edges were ridged like tiny saw-teeth, and faint faces and worn symbols stared up through the grime, half-eaten by time.

He let the disks clink together once, just to make them listen.

Jake stared as if Bartholomew had just shown him a dragonfly trapped in a jar.

Hank leaned in. "You shoot those?"

Scar found herself leaning too, before she could stop it. She'd seen tools on the road, seen knives and axes and the honest bluntness of a stick. This was different—small, precise, carried like a habit. Something made for distance.

Witch Woman's eyes didn't go to the sling first. They went to Bartholomew's hands: practiced, careful, and comfortable with his sling.

Bartholomew tipped one disk onto the leather pouch, thumb and forefinger quick and sure. "Mostly they're scared of us," he said. "They keep their distance. But if they get too bold—" Bartholomew looked around, making sure the area was clear. He slipped a disk into the sling's pouch and snapped it toward a post leaning against a crumbled wall. "SPANG!" The disk ricocheted, buzzing with the spin it had taken at impact.

Bartholomew let the sling spin down and flop in his hand. He handed it to the boys, who took it wordlessly—mouths open, eyes wide. The remaining disks chimed softly as they settled in his palm.

Witch Woman's voice stayed level when she spoke, as if she were placing a hand on the sharp edge of the moment. "They are just humans like you and me," she said. "But they never got what they needed to realize it."

Bartholomew didn't argue. He only nodded once, and tucked everything away again, casual as a man pocketing a spoon.

They turned a corner, and the world changed again.

The chatter and colour of the square gave way to quieter spaces. The path narrowed, flanked now by stone and timber homes, their patchwork construction softened by years of use. Jonno's red handprint appeared on doors, lintels, corners of painted wood—tiles affixed with care, each one a mark of belonging.

Here and there, old things bloomed with new life: a rusted satellite dish repurposed into a flower bed; a cracked bathtub filled with lavender. Children's chalk drawings covered the base of a wall—stick-figure families with enormous hands and grinning faces. A shirtless man dozed in a hammock made of netting and canvas, one foot touching the ground just enough to keep it swaying.

They passed under a string of sun-bleached flags—bright scraps of cloth from a hundred other places—and stepped into a wide, sunlit courtyard.

It felt open but protected, a space held gently by the arms of the surrounding buildings. The earth underfoot was swept and packed, with tufts of grass and clusters of herbs edging the stones. Clay pots lined the walls, filled with basil, mint, and wild chamomile.

To the left stood Tina's Healing Hut, modest and square, with smoke curling from a metal vent on the roof. The windows were covered in pale woven cloth, and the door stood open just a crack.

From within came the clean, warm smells of a practiced healer's hand—boiled lye soap, dried sage, bruised rosemary, and linen hanging to dry. A faint sharpness of vinegar. The whisper of rubbing alcohol or something close to it. Scar didn't know the names of everything she smelled, but she knew what it meant.

The smells came together and made a familiar melody. Different than Witch Woman's healing hut at Trigger Lake, but close enough that Scar felt it in her chest: the same overriding cleanliness, the same freshness that said healing.

Someone here knew how to mend.

She paused a moment longer in the courtyard, letting the scents fill her lungs, her feet adjusting to the stillness beneath them. This wasn't a camp. This wasn't the road.

They had reached a place that could hold them.

She looked ahead, toward the far side of the yard—and then sideways, meeting Witch Woman's gaze.

The older woman gave her a small, knowing wink. Just once. The kind that said: You smell it too. You know what it means.

Scar didn't smile back, but something loosened in her shoulders.

She looked ahead again.

They hadn't seen it yet.

But she could feel it waiting.