

+++

Minnesota had only seen a river once, when he was younger. He had wandered away from Mam and Pap at the Market, winding his way through the stalls until he reached the enclosure. Then he went around that and kept going. It was a foolish thing to do, he knew now; he could have hurt himself or even dried out. But something in his little legs told him to keep going. He wanted to explore.

He found his way onto a slight slope that led down to a small wooden platform. The platform was fashioned over the edge of a current of water maybe five or six feet wide. As he stepped on the structure, his pap suddenly appeared beside him.

“Get off there, Minnie,” he said as he picked up his son. “You could get hurt.”

“What is this?” Minnesota asked with awe.

“This is the river. This is where we get our water. There are water farmers who come out and gather it every day and make sure it’s safe for us to drink. Then we buy it at the Market.”

“It’s so big.”

“It is. But it’s dangerous. Don’t play near it, kay?”

Older kids played in the river in the summer, taking off their clothes and diving in completely, like they were taking a bath. Minnesota never did. To him, it was frightening – all that water moving so quickly. It looked like it could gobble somebody up if it wanted to.

The river that the two brothers now saw before them put the town’s body of water to shame. It was at least twice as wide and ran much faster. Road 101 went right over it, on a

crumbling stone bridge. It was not the river, though, that Minnesota was watching carefully as the horses pulled the wagon closer. It was the people.

There were maybe about twenty of them, mostly adults, who were coming out of crudely-built houses along the banks. The shelters were made of wood and mud stuck together and dried, but a few of them also had a thick sheet of metal or a few stones from the bridge to reinforce the walls. The people themselves were scantily-clad, the women wearing a top that bared their belly, and the men with no shirt at all. Some of the kids went completely naked.

Minnesota stopped the wagon a little ways off, watching them from afar. They looked normal enough, more or less like the people in town. Their skin was darker from the sun, though, and they obviously didn't eat much – there was no one that reminded him of Mare Frick here. They were unkempt, like there was something wild in them waiting to lash out.

“I wish you could see this, Maple. This is nothing like back home.”

To his right, his brother had his head out the window. “I can hear them. They have a strange way of speaking. I don't understand some of the words.” He pulled his head back in and turned to his brother. “Think they're safe?”

Minnesota shook his head. “I don't know.”

He looked down the river in both directions. To the right, it disappeared over a ridge, most likely leading straight to the Waves. There wouldn't be a place to cross that way. To the left, it kept going forever, until the edge of the earth was blurred with heat.

The fifteen-year-old was tempted to take the wagon off the road and look for a better crossing down that way, one where they didn't have to interact with anybody. He groaned. But how long would it be until they found a crossing? And would they ever be able to find Road 101 again? And more important than that, how long could they survive without water?

Since the river connected with the Waves, it could very well poison them. If they kept going and drank the water for themselves, they could pass on without anyone ever knowing. These people looked healthy enough, though, so they had obviously come up with a solution. Minnesota and his brother needed to find out what that solution was. He sighed and scratched his chin on his shoulder. Any way he looked at it, he was going to have to talk to them.

"Maple," he said with seriousness, "We're going in here. But be careful. Stay alert. We don't know what's going to happen."

The twelve-year-old gave a tight-lipped smile. "Kay, Minnie. Let's go."

Carefully, Minnesota drove the wagon into the small settlement. As soon as they were spotted, the people stared. All activity ceased. The inhabitants watched with wide eyes as the wagon passed their huts. A kid stepped out to get a closer look, but her mother pulled her back, close to her side. A couple of men with long spears tightened their grip on their weapons as they stood in front of their families. They were dirty, he saw, like they didn't wash themselves. Their hair was tangled in knots and their faces were hard. Brown hands and feet lived at the ends of their limbs. Distrust lived on their faces.

"Be my eyes, Minnie."

Minnesota looked out the window as they continued further into the settlement. Several people were following behind, whispering among themselves. “They looked scared,” was all he could say.

He drove the wagon into an open area beside the river, smacking his lips. The sound of the water rushing by so close to them was enough to make his mouth feel even drier than before. With a pull on the leads, he halted the horses by the bridge.

“Are we getting out?” asked Maple. The boy had his hands thrust in his pockets. Were they shaking?

“Not yet. I want to see what’s going to happen first.”

After a few moments, the people began to cautiously approach. Several women stepped up to the animals and reached out their hands, petting the soft hair on their neck. Others made a loose circle around the wagon, inspecting it closely. Some looked up at the two boys riding inside, but none made any attempt to communicate with them.

“What is it?” he heard a bushy-haired kid ask in a thick accent.

“I think it’s a house,” another one said.

Minnesota looked around, frowning. Sure enough, there wasn’t a horse or a wagon anywhere in sight. There were small baskets lying about, and one woman had a cloth hamper draped around her body, but nothing larger than that. No wonder they were so entranced by the giant contraption in their midst, not to mention the huge animals carrying it.

“Do they look nice?” his little brother whispered.

“They don’t look like they’ll hurt us, at least. But I’m not sure if I’d call it ‘nice.’”

After steeling himself for interaction with the strangers, he stepped out of the wagon and onto the hard ground. “Stay in here,” he told Maple. “I’ll be right back.”

“I want to come with you.”

“No. You’ll be safer here. If anything happens, flick the coolwhip and drive back the way we came. Kay?”

“But –“

“Kay?” he repeated.

Maple frowned and sank into his seat. “Kay.”

Satisfied, Minnesota stepped into the crowd. He looked at the people surrounding him, trying to decide which one to approach. None held eye contact with him.

“Excuse me,” he said to a woman who looked like his Mam. She pretended like she didn’t hear him and shuffled away quickly. He tried again with a young man who looked a little older than him, but the tall youth stuck out his chest and said nothing in return. After a couple more failed attempts at communicating, he thought about making a general announcement when a woman approached him.

“Where’s your madre?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your madre. Or papa. Are they with you in there?” She was wearing a necklace made of small white stones. Her shirt was more like a piece of ragged cloth tied around her torso than anything else. Her whole body was wrinkled by the sun like a farmer’s.

“Uhh, no,” he answered, not fully understanding the question. “I don’t think so, anyway.”

“So it’s just you and your little campadre all alone?”

“Can you please tell me – is this water safe to drink?”

The reddened face of the woman slowly looked over at the river where Minnesota was pointing. “That water?”

“Yes,” he said. “Is it safe to drink, or is it like the Waves?”

She pressed her lips together firmly as she glanced at the wagon and then back at him.

“The water under the bridge there?”

“Yes. Can we fill up our canisters with it?”

“Well, I don’t know.” She laughed, and her necklace bounced against her chest. A man a few paces off let out a soft chuckle as well. The others were still focused on the wagon. “You need to talk to Jockey. He can help you, I think.”

“Kay, where is he?”

“I’ll take you to him.” She started down one of the paths between the huts. “Follow me.”

“Oh,” Minnesota said. “I need to get my brother. Hold on.” He ran back to the wagon.

“Maple, we’re getting water. Bring your canister.” He grabbed his own from his bag.

“Are they nice, Minnie?” the boy asked.

“They’re nice enough. Now come on.”

“Won’t need those,” the woman called out when she saw the object. “Jockey has his own.”

Minnesota shrugged as he put his back. “You heard her,” he told his brother.

Maple left his canister and eased down from the wagon, cane in hand. “What about the horses?”

“They’ll have to wait. We won’t be long.” He held out his hand for his brother and guided him back to the woman with the necklace.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked as they approached.

“Nothing,” he snapped at her. It was a rude question for someone she just met. “Where’s Jockey?”

She clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Follow me.”

The people gathered around the wagon watched her carefully as she led the two newcomers into a cluster of huts. Some shook their heads, pointing at the procession as it passed. Whatever awe they had shown the wagon and the horses was not given to the boys. Or, it seemed, the woman who was serving as their escort. Minnesota looked back to see the horses standing comfortably, allowing themselves to be petted by their admirers. He hoped they’d still be there when he returned.

Passing several of the huts, he saw most had only a cloth curtain that served as a door to the structure, which was mostly hardened mud. Looking inside those huts that had their curtain

opened, he saw very little: a mattress of sorts; a few bags; the remnants of a small fire. In one he spied a stockpile of fruits and vegetables.

In another was a slew of plastic containers – piled high to the ceiling, they looked like they held water. These must be what the woman was talking about. There was a rail-thin man standing in front of this hut with a metal spear in his hand. He glowered at the boys as they went by.

Their destination was a larger hut, set apart from the others on the near side of the river. Made of more metal than mud, it was surrounded by a tall wooden fence. There was a walkway in front paved with old stones from the bridge. The woman stopped beside the fence's wide opening.

“In there,” she said with a casual gesture.

“Aren't you coming with us?” Minnesota asked. It seemed rude not to introduce them to this mysterious person who held sway over the river.

“Nah,” the woman voiced as she wiped her arm across her forehead. “Just tell him what you told me.”

“About the water?”

“Yup.”

“Kay,” he said, upset that she was leaving them on their own. “Thanks for your help.”

She shook her head and laughed again, nasal and harsh. “Don't thank me.” Then she turned and sauntered away, but not before adding, “Tell him Nance brought you!”

Once she disappeared behind a neighboring hut, Maple squeezed his brother's hand. "I don't know if I like this place," he whispered.

Minnesota squared his shoulders. Both of them couldn't be scared. "Come on." The two walked the short distance of the path and came to a grey curtain stained with watermarks that hung down over the tall portal. "Should we knock?" he asked aloud.

He didn't have to answer his own question; a deep voice from inside the hut bellowed, "What do you want?"

He was taken aback by the voice's sudden gruffness. He opened his mouth to speak, but Maple got there first: "Hello," his younger brother said. "Nance brought us."

"So what? What do you want?"

Minnesota cleared his throat. "We wanted to see if we could –"

"Get inside here if you want to talk to me! Don't stand around out there!"

Hurriedly, the nervous boy pushed aside the curtain and stepped into the darkness of the hut, pulling his brother along with him.