

### *After Operation Silent Lightning...*

Dan, the lion, raises a toast to his fellow brothers in arms, and to their Canadian counterparts after reciting an impromptu speech about congratulating their success. It was a smooth operation. Mostly enemy casualties, none to their own incurred, and a ferocious howl to end their own evenings on, and the lives of many others who lived to harm.

Given that it is still a black operation, they only celebrated it in Langley's bar. It's furnished like a bar—varnished tables and bar tops, quality liquor, stools with red padded seats. Without the inconvenience of someone drinking all the scotch, or the nightly bar fights. It only happens once a month. After the cheer, everyone talks between themselves in different groups. Some exchange recounts of what had happened, others exaggerating moreso.

Dan finds his crowd with Dexter and Miles, both in their dark-green Canadian fatigues. He himself in multicam camo. Their conversation starts with how to howl, the lion finding himself doing one too. It's not perfect, and he's gotten some of his canid brothers-in-arms laughing at him. And then their discussion shifted to life in Canada, having been from the more rural parts of Alaska.

And then Dan says, "I like it here. More urbanized than Ketchikan, certainly a lot more places to get some grub." He takes a sip, nodding to Miles that it's the end of his rather simple answer. But he asks him, "How about you, man? Ever been to the States?"

Miles nods, taking a good sip of his bourbon. The hit of his drink nudges his memory past all the nitty and gritty. Through Silent Lightning, becoming Halifax Reaper, and before all the training. He remembers that morning call. "I'll tell you the story of..."

## **Canadians, Chaps, and Cowboys**

"Fennix Residence," A younger Miles answered the phone by their foyer. "To whom am I speaking?" His father was in his study doing paperwork for his last tour in Syria. His tail wagged with anticipation as this may have been the phone call he'd been waiting for. His father had been vague with this surprise because all he said was a 'family trip'. Were they going back to Polynesia? Go picnicking out in the Canadian wildlife? And by family, it meant that Uncle Chase was coming along too.

The other voice behind the phone was warm, cordial, "Oh, you must be Dexter's son. Miles, right?" He said, "I'm Ricky Furgo, one of your father's patrol mates when we were in the oil fields in Khasham. May I speak with your father, please?"

"One sec," Miles said, setting the phone on the table before rushing up the stairs. The young wolf's mind was alight with possibilities on where they were going to go. His excitement and himself came to a halt in front of his father's door, knocking it thrice.

"Is it for me?" Dexter said from the far end of the room.

"Yes dad, it's Ricky."

"Alright, thank you." Dexter could be heard walking towards the door, unlocking it and stepping out.

Miles always glanced inside after his father walked past. He's allowed to enter its premises under supervision, just that there were a lot of books and delicate information that he wouldn't and shouldn't know about. Peering inside was like looking into a library as the ceiling seemed taller, bookshelves on both sides filled with books aligned to the top.

Dexter hurried down the stairs with Miles in tow after closing the study's door. He then picked up the phone, his son listening beside. A few pats on his head as he started discussing matters in which he'd surprise his son.

Miles grinned throughout despite not hearing what his father spoke with his friend.

Dexter said, "Hey Rick, I got home last week. Chase too, though he came two days later because of the storm."

There was a pause, Ricky answered back.

The older wolf went on, "He's about sixteen now," he ruffled his son's hair. "Nope. Only been to Polynesia as far as I could tell."

Miles' ears perked up. It was going to be a family outing!

"Hah, he's already guessed that we'll be going somewhere. A smart kid he is, and wants to be a soldier like me."

"No, I'm not sending him to the Marines. Army, maybe." He turned to Miles, "Son, do you want to be a pilot?"

Miles' smile vanished followed with a shaking head.

"That's my boy," he rubbed his shoulder. "Yeah, sorry Rick. He'd rather be in the army."

And a bunch of 'Mhms' and 'Sures' followed, with a few 'No's' in between.

"In one week? I'll just finish filing the report for CSIS today and we'll see each other in a week then. Alright, I'll call you when I've got the tickets. See ya, Rick." And he put the phone back down on its switch hook.

"So where are we going dad?" Miles was hopping at this point. The destinations in mind were US, Europe, or Canada's Eastern Seaboard.

Dexter held him down holding his shoulders, "Relax, son." After he's settled down he finally said, "We're going to the U.S."

His red eyes widened, "U.S.?! Where? New York? Washington? California?"

"Nevada," He said simply.

His interest waned for a moment. There's still the excitement of visiting their neighboring country but he didn't even know where Nevada was or what's in it. His shoulders slouched as he tried to think where in the big 'ol US of A it was in.

Dexter chuckled though, "I thought you wanted to be a..." he paused again to build tension.

It caught Miles' attention alright, his excitement returning for a very big reveal.

"Cowboy."

"Cowboy?! We get to be cowboys?!"

"Indoor voices, Miles."

"Sorry." He held his snout shut, whispering out, "We're going to be cowboys?"

"Yep. Like those old movies you watched back when you were four. And the few times you asked me why we didn't have cowboys in Canada. Your friend Rick inherited a ranch that he's turned into a summer home. Invites friends to hang out, have barbecues, or go shooting at a range."

"Do I get to fire a 'big 'ol iron on my hip'?" Miles stood in thought, imagining how to do a quickdraw. His younger memories came back to him. All the time he'd roleplay as a cowboy, and how his father always seemingly lost to him whenever they drew in a duel.

"You'll have to ask for his permission first." Dexter patted him on the back.

"And we get to go there next week?"

Dexter nodded, "I'll just finish my work upstairs and buy us some tickets. We'll then start prepping tomorrow, okay?"

"I'll start watching those cowboy movies again!" Miles ran off into the living room, already knelt down below the tv set to find the DVDs of cowboy films across multiple eras.

Dexter reminded him, "As long as you return it to their proper place, kiddo." And he ascended the staircase waving to his son who waved back as the old timey music played.

Unlike movies today, these films immediately found themselves in the thick of it. He barely remembered what he saw in his childhood when rewatching them because all he remembered were the scenes with guns. Sheriffs and bandits shooting at each other, duels on open roads with tumbleweeds going in between. And the few times that there was a damsel in distress. But he didn't recall the overarching story, or the film grain. It looked new.

The day went by watching about ten films because some were only about half an hour long. Even his father joined in having made a batch of salted popcorn for them to snack on as they watched. Their eyes fixed to the screen, immersed in watching knowing that they may live like them. Minus all the killing and the rescuing of course— only the fun activities. Spitting tobacco, which Dexter had forbade Miles from doing, shooting iron, and trotting around on horseback. Just to name a few.

Once it was night, Miles couldn't help but dream about being at the ranch, shooting at targets while riding horseback. He would wake up the following morning shouting "Yee-haw!" as an outcome of his very lucid dream. They went to the mall after their morning rituals and breakfast, with Dexter ordering plane tickets, and Miles looking at cowboy hats. They tried to look for chaps and tall boots but there were none. Dexter made the promise of buying them when they're in the U.S.

Chase called that night saying that he had the same flight as they too, and had bought himself his own cowboy hat as well. Miles rewatched some of those movies again, this time trying to memorize the one-liners. His father started packing for them, chuckling whenever he passed by his son playing cowboy.

On the day of the flight, they met at the Prince George International. A quaint airport surrounded by the popular Canadian forestry. It's not as large as other airports like in Ottawa or Vancouver, and may as well be mistaken for a metropolitan bus port. Hugs were exchanged, and they regrettably had lunch there given that the food was more pricey. But it sure beats airline food.

After the hype had settled down in Miles, he asked his father as they waited for their plane to touch down, "If you and Ricky went to patrol together, are you two the same rank?"

"That's a good question, sonny," Dexter answered. He took one last look at the Canadian forests before going off to another desert state for over two weeks. It was like being on tour except shorter, with his family, and without the urgency. He told him, "Not exactly. He's a sergeant and I'm a lieutenant, but we're assigned to do extended patrols somewhere in Khasham. And he usually brings up his ranch because of how distant we are from the urban life. I asked him a lot about it because I don't know anything about the farm life. A lot of cattle as it turns out."

Chase remarked, "That doesn't answer the question though."

Miles still liked the answer regardless.

But Dexter was one to make sure, "Right. Our rankings aren't too far and the patrol needed volunteers. Just so happened that he and I wanted to stretch our legs. Luckily there was never any danger in our region, especially at night."

"Not with the New Moon sniper, right?"

"Right."

"Right!" Miles exclaimed as pride beamed through his eyes. His father's tale never got old. And the PA started talking, hushing them down. It was their plane that finally landed, which meant boarding was to happen in less than an hour. Miles got off his seat and patted his muzzle against the window, seeing the Canadian Airlines land— a small plane with two engines not meant for long overseas flights. Smaller compared to when they went to Polynesia, but still cool to see regardless.

"Hold your horses now, son," Dexter said, holding his shoulder. "It'll still be an hour or so before we actually board."

"Sorry," Miles watched the plane taxi around the airstrip. He'd forgotten how it usually went. De-boarding, luggage removal, cleaning, and the pilots having a quick lunch. But true to what his father said, it did take an hour before he finally stepped foot into the plane. The cabin was far smaller than the first time he was in one— no column down the middle. Three seats on each side, though unfortunately Chase had another seat since he booked at a different time.

Miles was with his father though, and had the beautiful window seat view. At least he could remember how to buckle his seatbelt, but the laminated instruction manual in front of him was a great reminder. Everything was stowed in, his backpack stowed under the seat. But he can't stop looking out of the window and looking at the trees, saying goodbye to them too.

They taxi'd out of the boarding area half an hour later, and they took off without a hitch. Miles feels the unfamiliar pull as the plane gains altitude. And before he knew it, they were on the air. Miles kept his fixation on the sea of clouds as their plane flew across. He could see bits of land below, the green turning to a shade of sand-brown as the captain announces that they are now flying over Washington state.

Dexter took photos of Miles' wide-eyed expressions as he saw the new environment. And after their complimentary afternoon snack, they were soon descending three hours later. It was vastly different compared to their scenery back home. A lot of desert, and not a lot of big planes either. Most of them were training aircraft.

"Dad, what are those?" Miles noticed helicopters that he'd seen in some of his father's old pictures. They're military craft for sure, a cockpit for two, with a large bow turret, and small wings that had attachable slots to them. It didn't have a middle compartment.

Dexter leaned over his side, his lips smirked, "That, my son, is an Apache attack helicopter. Saved my butt a lot of times." He sat back properly, "See that turret at its front?"

Miles focused on it, a large weapon indeed.

"It fires grenades at a fast rate. It's like a machine gun, y'know."

"That's strong." Miles, astonished, "Can you take a photo of it?"

"Sure, here, you do the honors," Dexter passed him the camera, and Miles took about two shots. He even noticed some of the passengers ahead and behind glancing over at them too. "Fun fact, that turret can face wherever the pilot's looking."

"That's sci-fi."



"Hardly, it's technology from the 80s?" Dexter was unsure. Still, it's fascinating that this level of technology was ahead of its time back when he was still an infant. What's next? Knife missiles?

Miles didn't notice his uncertain tone, and passed the camera back to his father. Beyond the fence though, and the desert, was a distant mountain range where the clouds kissed its peak. He leaned on different positions of the window to take in more of the American lifestyle, and he could barely see the edge of a town farther behind the plane. Once their aircraft was fully taxi'd and parked, Miles saw the small terminal; Hawthorne Airport. It was smaller than Prince George, but was able to accommodate them.

It didn't take long to disembark, to be immediately kissed by the hot sierra winds as they descended from the aircraft. Still cloudy though, Miles hoped he could see the blue skies soon. He saw the town, and a few trees but they were not as green as Canada's. And opposite of the airport was a pitstop, with another mountain range further behind. They're all led to the small terminal after, greeted by an entrance that had two American flags on both sides of the doorway. The Americans were a patriotic bunch after all.

Dexter started calling Ricky, while Chase kept an eye over his son. After a quick process through immigration, which had been a makeshift desk, they retrieved their luggage and had stepped out onto the parking lot. He finally said, "Now that's done, Ricky said he'll pick us up in an hour." And he pointed at the aforementioned pit stop, "Over there. We'll find a place to relax, maybe have some coffee."

"Frappe for me," Miles' tail wagged, eager to try American coffee.

So they went to a Stellarmint, Miles experiencing a more American flavor than the one in Canada. The difference being he drank it in another country. He asked his father's permission to step out and check the nearby stores, glancing at them earlier were brands he was not too familiar with. Instead, Dexter told Chase to look after their things while they explored together.

They left the comfort of their air-conditioned cafe and out into the growing heat as clouds moved away, exposing the blue skies that went past the mountains. Miles had finished his drink, the innate cool already fleeting as the persistent desert heat took hold. Next to the cafe was a post office, and after that was a Texan BBQ restaurant. In Nevada, which they both found to be quite funny, and appetizing as they walked past the smell of barbecue sauce and grilled pork fat. And much after, they found a clothing store.

Well, more specifically as Miles put it, "An actual cowboy store." It was unsurprising to see it here as most cowboy movies take place in the desert. The store itself was called 'Sheriff Hawthorne'. Its front had mannequins wearing very fine button up long sleeves, leathery chaps and boots, golden buckles, and paired with decorated horse saddles. The advertising price was way out of Dexter's paygrade, but the store offered cheaper alternatives inside. Walking in, they encountered a discount at the restaurant they had passed– 20% off their order after showing a receipt from this place.

Dexter had his eyes on the buckles resting on a shelf top with others, all of them glistening under the spotlight. Miles followed close behind. They had the sheen and shine like gold but it wasn't the real deal since it's only about a hundred bucks. The one they fixated on had the emblem of feral wolves snarling against each other. "This one would look nice on my belt," Dexter said, taking one and comparing it with his current generic buckle. "Son, can you please fetch me that basket over there?"

Miles went over, "Sure, dad." He eyed more interesting cowboy paraphernalia; denim jeans, cheaper leather chaps, boots with spurs on them. Each displayed under a thematic spotlight, he noticed, that looked like a miner's lamp. The basket aligned with the theme too, a woven wicker basket that had a slight prickle to his hands. He returned to his father who immediately put two of those wolf buckles inside, and he got a lion one for Chase since he was a panther. And they went over to the chaps that Miles pointed out, and three red leathery ones went into the basket. Their denim? May as well. Three light-blue ones went into the basket.

As for boots, Dexter wondered if their outfit would pair well with the classic brown leather, or this shining silvery one. He pondered for several moments, taking the red chap from their basket and matching it with either boots. It wouldn't be long before he got the attention of the storehelp; a Mexican wolf dressed in a white cowboy hat, blue long sleeves, brown leathery chaps with denim, and black cowboy boots with silvery spurs.

"Howdy there, partner," his tone was a thick Central American. Dark gray wolf fur that blended with dust brown and white. And the name tag on his shirt said 'Fierro'. "Trying to find the right color?"

"Yes, we are," Miles answered on their behalf. He was almost as tall as he, but his father was taller.

Dexter wondered aloud, "Would the red chaps go well with the brown leather or the silver one?"

Fierro cleared his throat, glanced at the two. It was clear to him that they weren't from around here. Neither was, technically, "I'd say the silver boots." He pointed it out. "It's not everyday I see someone buy the red chaps." And, like any salesman would, he used his lingo to sell it to them more. "I think it suits you both, matches the eyes too. Though, if I may, I kindly recommend the silver buckle. We have those ferocious wolves in stock too. It'll match your whole get-up even more."

"That would be lovely," Dexter returned the chaps to their basket, swapping out for those golden buckles and passed it to Fierro who immediately went over to the counter where the silver buckles were on display. It was there due to a different promo, a discount that made it 50% off.

Dexter eyed the white long sleeves in a different part of the store, next to a stuffed bullhead on display. They were made of cotton, best suited for the climate. It was times like these that he was thankful that he, his son, and Chase were all similar sizes. And by the time

Fierro came back with the silver buckles, two wolves and a lion, he asked him, "Do you have a fitting room here somewhere to try these on?"

He passed them to him and gestured at the changing booths next to the cashier. Its doors were elongated saloon doors that had locks on them for the sake of privacy.

Both Canadian wolves went and tried their clothing on, stepping out in their new uniform with the price tags still dangling. Though Miles needed help with exchanging his belt buckle, which his father did with ease.

"How about a hat to match your current outfit?" Fierro, being the dutiful storehand that he was, arrived with two white cowboy hats in hand, and even red neckerchiefs slung around his arm.

"We already have our own hats, thank you," Dexter smiled. "But those neckerchiefs would surely look nice, give 'em here."

They tied their new accessories around their necks, almost completing the get up. Miles was the most excited as he resembled the actors in those movies. He started doing finger guns, trying to emulate a quickdraw with his imaginary holster.

"Finally caught you," the young wolf said to Fierro.

Fierro raised his hands, fingers spread in the same manner as the movie was. It was a pivotal scene in the 70's western where Brigand Bastion had been caught by Sheriff Ray, except the former raised his left all spread out, and the right with a finger gun. He said in a gruff voice, "You've only caught me, yer yet to cuff me." And he flicked his finger. In the movie the sheriff had been disarmed with a well placed rifle shot, allowing Bastion to get away.

Miles cheered, Dexter laughing, wishing he had his camera with him.

Though not one to waste time, "Do you need anything else, sir?" Fierro rested his hands, looking around to suggest more of their products to his customers. Miles looked in the same direction too but Dexter shook his head, satisfied.

"I think that's it." Dexter motioned his son to the cash register that resembled a bar top. The shelves behind it had different kinds of engraved bottles purely for drinking aesthetics.

Fierro got behind the fake bar and received the basket of their merchandise. "Will that be cash or credit?" He asked while scanning the tags, some from the unworn products, the rest from a dandy logbook.

The price was of no concern for Dexter, and had enough cash on hand. The rest of their things were put in a nice woven bag bearing the store's logo. Only available since their purchase exceeded \$500 USD.

Miles happily ripped the price tags off once Dexter received the receipt. He was a stride closer to being a true cowboy. But then a pick-up truck parked in front of the store, getting all their attention. Fierro's especially who walked past them with eagerness.

Dexter raised a brow seeing a familiar face exit the driver's seat. The same face would go over to the front door that Fierro would open for, and give him a hug and a plastic bag with tupperware inside.

"Ricky?" Dexter was astonished to see that he knew the employee who'd been helping them. Moreso when his friend kissed the Mexican wolf on his cheek.

Ricky could barely recognize them as cowboys, clarifying with Fierro that these were customers. The latter nodded, and he chuckled and slapped his knee. "Dexter, you look really different without your gear." He shook the black wolf's hand. "And this must be your son, Miles." And extended his paw to him.

Miles shook it, "You're the guy on the phone."

Ricky was almost as short as Miles, a fox-dog hybrid with brown fur. He wore sunglasses and had dark red eyes peeking out behind them, it had served as a conversation starter with Dexter before. Despite having invited them to his personal ranch, he did not dress the part, save for the holster with a handgun in it. "That I am, sonny. Welcome to Nevada." And he looked around. "Where's Chase?"

"Coffee shop a few stores down. We should get him." Dexter said, carrying the bag with him.

"Lemme," Ricky insisted on taking it off his hands, bringing it to the pick-up truck's cabin. "Happy you two met my lovely Fierro."

Dexter and Miles turned to the cowboy sniffing his lunch, waving gingerly at them. The latter waved back happily, while he was still surprised and stunned given the circumstances. "Didn't think you swung that way, Ricky."

"Yer not the first to say that," Ricky patted his shoulder. "But this place is plenty friendly, save for the coyotes." He traced the edges of his holster. "They're a nuisance. But I digress," he gestured to the coffee store.

After they all waved farewell to Fierro who thanked them for doing business, Ricky also pointed out his ownership of the BBQ grill restaurant beside. It belonged to his other partner, the same one who made the lunch he brought. Dexter tried to think about it but Ricky was rather on edge having to even say it in the first place. They didn't bring it up anymore.

Chase sat up straight from lounging when he saw both Fennixes in their new costumes. The two wolves were the sight of the cafe for a brief moment because of how they matched. The embodiment of subtle Canadian pride. They got their luggage, Ricky ordering himself a frappe before having gone too, and were on the road within ten minutes.

On the way, they talked about the helicopters they saw. Ricky said they were conducting an aerial exercise. He said that if they're lucky, they'll see an air show tonight. The talk of aircraft returned to talk of cowboys, discussing movies they've watched. The hybrid even said that his ranch was used in the backdrop of commercials, eliciting a laughter from the other two adults.

It was about three in the afternoon, and Ricky advised them to save their trek for tomorrow morning instead. They'd miss out on the sights traveling late in the afternoon and closer towards the evening.

They passed by arable land, seeing fields of greens grow and expand contrasting the brown and stone. Mostly rice, corn, and wheat. Ricky reminisced of working as a farm hand back in his younger years, but he found interest in becoming a soldier because of the morning work appeal. Though he grew fond of animals during his military career, came home from his graduation to raise livestock and pursued his career as a military vet. Truly honest work he lamented.

Wilson Canyon was along the main road that can be traversed by horses, but at this time of day there were a lot of tourists trekking down its path as cars had been parked at its main entrance that bore the name. Ricky said it would be better to experience its serenity in the early morning and just before noon. And better still, there was a particular route that, while allowed, was pristine and rarely visited, while providing a better view. He'll show the way for it tomorrow.

They were at the ranch half an hour later, and it's what Miles expected save for a few modernities. Wooden fencing with electric lamp posts, a large sturdy home made of logs but decorated with a satellite dish, a few ACs, and modern-style windows. A massive grass field surrounded it, with two parking lots in the dirt next to it, and three trees sprouting flower buds before the next bloom.

"Where are the cows and horses?" Miles asked, trying to find them.

Ricky turned the car into the parking lot, "Barn in the back. Keeps 'em safe from cow tippers."

"Cow tippers?" Chase asked.

"Moreso just people scaring our cows. Or attempt to. They're more of a danger than the people themselves. Ever seen someone get kicked by a cow?" Ricky turned and looked for confirmation, all of them shaking their heads. "It's like being shot with armor on," and he glanced over Miles. "Or tripping but you fall off from a high floor."

Miles felt his chest suddenly climb, his words getting to him.

"The cows are fine. You gotta be a ruffian to ask for it. And your father talks highly of you. Sometimes won't shut up about how you want to be a soldier." He turned to Dexter, both of them smiling at each other. "You have a good father, kid." Ricky unlocked the door and opened his.

"And I have a great son," Dexter hugged his son before they both disembarked too.

Ricky carried all their luggage, his friends following close behind. A progenitor had been waiting on them by the foyer, smiling when he'd seen him. They're like dragons, supposedly a mythological species of their world. LED face screens with bodies of fluff and metal. Ricky set their luggage down the front door to hug and nuzzle him before introducing them to his friends, "Guys, this is Azzy. He's my partner and the keeper of the home whenever I'm out playing soldier."

"Hi," Azzy gave them a low shy wave. His tone was weak and thickly accented too, like Fierro's. But he was softer. He helped Ricky bring their luggage inside.



"Hey Rick, can we take a few pics out here first?" Dexter asked while peeking inside, motioning to Chase to grab his camera.

"Sure!" Ricky said. "You can also take a pic by the trees and at the barn, but don't use flash on the cows in case you go inside, okay?"

"Got it!" He turned to Chase again, "Can you also get our hats? You can dress up if you want to. Your costume's in the bag."

Chase nodded and went inside. Miles waited around by the trees growing in their open-range yard. Trimmed grass underneath his boots, and the trees seemed old but he's no gardener. Three of them were planted in a way that provided ample cover from the slow-setting sun.

Dexter joined him, sitting down under the shade and checking the photographs Chase had taken so far. "How are you liking the States so far, son?" He looked at his son who sat on the tree beside.

Miles tried to emulate his father's pose, stretching his legs outward, back against the bark. "Warmer, even at this time it feels like noon back home."

"Trust me, it gets hotter." Dexter showed him some of the photographs, when Chase arrived wearing almost the exact same thing. Only difference being the buckle. He passed their hats to them, finally completing the normal cowboy get-up.

Miles felt the invigoration of fully living out a fantasy his younger self had. And despite the layer of clothes worn, it kept him cool. Or it must be the wind blowing through the late afternoon. But they were burning daylight, and it's high time they had their photos taken. It would be the first of many, given the length of their stay. But they want to save their more intense photos for a much better scenery.

Miles would be the first to strike a pose, and all of them were like a cowboy's. Mostly copied from movies, he pulled out his finger guns, and pretended to spin a lasso. And simple poses hereafter. His father would do the same as well, but he included Miles in his poses, having each other back to back. Both smiling, with the same red eyes, except their fur patterns are opposite of the other. In the last set, Chase had his own, and a few poses that showed him laying down under the tree and relaxing. The other two joined soon after, reviewing their photos and how they could pass off as models on a Halloween magazine.

"Hey guys!" Ricky rushed out, his arm outstretched and pointing to the sky. "Jet's going to pass over soon or you're gonna miss it."

Miles was first to his boots to see two jets coming over yonder at breakneck speeds. He would then learn that these were a pair of F-15s performing a simulated combat patrol. They were in and out of the airspace within the minute, Chase unable to even catch a photo of them.

But with their Canadian friends then standing up, Ricky cordially invited them inside for a quick afternoon snack while they all waited for Fierro to come home. This humble abode reflected the same mantra outside; wooden furniture, and cloth sofas on wooden frames, yet with a functioning flatscreen tv and three pairs of computers to name a few. They made their way into the kitchen to be greeted with an array of fragrant smells; aromatic mini-burgers, and three mugs of root beer floats. All prepared by the progenitor in an apron. Ricky, Azenu, and eventually when Fierro would get back had a set of their own too.

Azenu said to them, as they sat around the table, "Bon appetit!"

And the wolves and panther started wolfing down on their meals. They enjoyed the sweet and succulent taste of medium rare beef, enhanced by the caramelized onions, and balanced out by the cheese's saltiness. Followed by the sweeter and creamy texture of their drink too. Miles helped for seconds on the root beer float, which Azenu provided.

Once they were done, Ricky invited them over back to the living room where they lounged around watching a classic cowboy film, remastered to have surround sounds, and be presented with plenty of pixels on the big screen.

Fierro arrived home as the film rolled into credits. He opened the door to be greeted by his fog and protogen in a tight embrace. And Chase captured the candid moment, prompting a blush on the hybrid's face. He feigned laughter and everyone followed after. And when Azenu invited them to dinner outside, which he had been making while their guests watched the film, Ricky pulled Chase aside and asked if he could have a copy of the photo.

Once they were all outside, they were greeted by a familiar night sky with a lighter blue shade. Fierro pointed out the constellations and their facts to Miles and Chase, Azenu worked on the open grill to finish cooking their barbecued steaks, and Ricky fetched the map for Dexter's outdoor trip tomorrow.

They gathered themselves around as a big family about to have their dinner. From the entrees earlier to an added bowl of poutine ala Americano; crispy french fries in cream cheese and barbecue sauce; prime rib for their guests, and buttered steam veggies. And a serving of molten lava cake for dessert. With a quick utterance of grace around the table, everyone helped themselves. Miles in particular enjoyed the twist on poutine as it was more savory, and had a sweet and slight spicy kick. The steak was divine, hickory smoke, sweet, tender, and peels off the bone. The veggies were good, and had been emptied out because of the added butter to it, and dessert? It would be gone within the hour.

They spent the rest of the evening conversing, and Ricky even showed his guests the cows during their evening feed. He said that they would be milked in a matter of days, and asked for farm hands then. Dexter and Miles agreed in a heartbeat. And then Azenu led them to their rooms— Dexter and Miles sharing a bunk bed, and a mattress unrolled for Chase. It was quaint with a desk and a window that pointed at the rising sun, and a desk where they left their hats on. Out of their outfits and into their pajamas, they went off to sleep. Except for Miles, who stayed up half an hour longer as he imagined how tomorrow were to go.

*The next day...*

After a hearty breakfast of sausage, home-raised chicken eggs, and buckwheat flapjacks, Miles had been instructed by his father to stay put while Ricky would drive him and Chase to the nearby stable for their horses. He waved goodbye to Fierro donning a different cowboy uniform this time. He sat there, admiring the six grazing cows that Ricky brought out four in the morning. It reminded him of the few times he had awoken to his father and 'uncle' competing with each other through push-ups back then. He realized that the discipline and routine of being a farmer may not be far apart from being a soldier— perhaps him being a farm hand can open a way to that routine. Even if it was voluntary, he was a guest after all, he looked forward to it.

Well, in a way, he was already doing a duty. Make sure none of the cows got out. They were leashed to a nearby pike, but lengthy enough for them to walk around and not get too tangled with the nearby tree. They mooed occasionally, others licking each other clean. It was cute but he was still intimidated by Ricky's warning yesterday. The thought of it made him yank his collar. He's in the shade but it was surely getting hot. There weren't enough clouds in the sky to cover the sun in their pass, nor was it windy enough to cool him down. He unbuttoned his upper uniform, letting his body breathe.

Azenu had stepped out and given him a cold glass of water, which he drank in sips, thanking the protogen who went back inside. It would be another half-hour before his father and Chase returned with the horses. Three of them too, all with black saddles that have bags beside them.

"Hey son!" Dexter strode in, reigning a white horse behind him while he rode on a black one to match his fur. He was shirtless too, no, both of them were. They'd been perspiring because of the heat. "It's hot out," his father remarked, fanning himself with his cowboy hat.

Miles immediately came to him with half a glass of water left, "Here. I'll ask more from Azenu inside."

"Thank you kindly, son," he said in a cowboy accent, tipping his hat to him.

Miles smirked and tipped his own back too, rushing inside to fetch some refreshments. But Azenu's quite generous; he returned with three glasses and a pitcher of honey-infused iced tea.

Chase returned inside after they'd finished so he could also fetch their camera. All the while Dexter and Miles groomed the horses of their dust from the short travel.

"What's it like, riding a horse out in the open road?" Miles asked. This white horse named 'Silver' neighed in delight at his brushstrokes against his head.

"They don't scare easy to cars, and they can be fast if needed. Ricky's assured me that these three are his finest." Dexter fed Silver a sugar cube after. "Not like we need to rush. Best we admire the scenery."

"Couldn't agree more."

Chase returned outside with camera in hand, "Azenu's packed our lunch for the picnic too. He's just garnishing it. A classic cowboy stew." He sat and leaned against his chair, raising his legs over the other on the veranda. Even snuck a flashless candid photo of the father and son bonding over a horse.

Miles looked over at the other horses, "What're their names, dad?"

"The black one's called 'Midnight', and the brown one with the white fur on his snout? That's 'Milk Chocolate'." Dexter started cleaning up the former's fur.

"Aw, that's a cute name, isn't it Milk Chocolate?" Miles was in charge of cleaning her. "She's a beaut." The horse took kindly to his comments, licking his cheek as he tried to clean her. He laughed, struggling to clean her side, but was impressed with himself after he'd done it.

Azenu then came out with their lunches and snacks in medium tin cans, all stacked inside an ALICE pack that Chase took the liberty of wearing. He also gave them three large canteens to drink out of, and advised against drinking the river water down there.

The trio thanked him as they prepared themselves to embark on their journey. But with the sun nearing its peak in the sky, the heat had certainly gotten to Miles. The young wolf noticed his father and uncle being shirtless, asking, "Dad?"

"Yes, son?" He helped him up his horse.

"Is it okay if I go shirtless like you and uncle Chase?" Didn't even wait for an answer to unbutton the rest of his long sleeve. It was too darn hot out here.

Dexter and Chase glanced at each other, shrugged, and he said to him, "I don't see why not. Just don't go rolling around in the dirt, okay?" He patted his back, and went over to Midnight and got on his back.

"I won't," Miles held onto the horn on his saddle. Though it was similar to riding a motorbike, the creature had a mind of its own that doesn't always balance depending on his own movement.

Chase noticed and said, "Easy, Miles, the horse won't trip over on purpose. Sit up straight and you'll be fine." He climbed onto Milk Chocolate and did what he had just said. They were obedient and stoic after all.

Miles straightened his back, taking deep breaths in the hopes he wouldn't fall off his saddle. He put his boots on the stirrups and eased his hands onto the reins.

"That's it son," Dexter said. "But don't tighten it or you'll make tight turns. Keep it loose enough but don't let go."

The young wolf haphazardly figured it out, his heart thumping with excitement. Almost everything he had imagined last night came to fruition. Except his bravado self-image had remained in his imagination instead. Azenu came out and waited by the foyer in case there had been any issues at all. There were none thankfully, and he was able to see them off as they embarked for Wilson's Canyon.

It was a straightforward road they were going to, and all they had to do was look for the sign. Apart from the occasional farmland, there wasn't much to see other than a few mountain ranges, and the distant rivers that eventually led to the aforementioned canyon. There were a few critters in the desert that weren't commonplace in Canada; such as coyotes, a few brown snakes, foxes, and even mule deers. They all generally avoided roads, especially as cars drove by. Their horses paced themselves well, keeping straight and avoiding looking over yonder to predators that could scare them. Miles occasionally petted Silver for doing a job well done. He clarified with his dad if the waters in the canyon were safe enough for horses, which he said yes. There were a few cars that slowed down for them or moved around as they trotted.

Heat was still an issue, and Miles took careful swigs of his canteen to not finish it all in one go. They'd be there for a picnic and a photo op, and they'd stay there up to two hours past noon, when the sun would be at its highest. The contrast to the Canadian climate really hit him hard, tilting his hat all around to try and cover his fur; where his left shoulder was exposed, he had to tilt the hat in that direction, his right taking the brunt of the heat. He glanced back at his father and uncle, used to this experience despite their black fur. The young wolf agreed to steel his resolve so that he may become like them, if not better.

With one gulp, he straightened himself and kept eyes on the road that shimmered afar from the heat. It was a cool effect, Miles thought. And it wouldn't be long before they found the sign leading into the canyon.

Like they agreed upon yesterday– there was no one here at this time. They trotted from the road and into the dirt, kicking up dust that stuck to the horses once more. Vague footsteps covered the trail as evening winds tried to cover it. They passed along a very shallow river, with rocks peaking out adding beauty to the bed. The horses were given the opportunity to drink water, and they had been thirsty from their last trot. Their cowboys took sips from canteens and went on their way after.

"It's better to be on horseback, y'know why Miles?" Chase asked.

"Because of the snakes." Miles answered.

"That's right. Better to be safe than sorry." The panther watched the bushes they passed by, wiping the sweat off his forehead. He saw something slither in between them and away, seeing a fearful snake distance itself further away.

"You just saw one, didn't you?" Dexter patted his horse.

"Mhm."

"Will I ever be able to do that?" Miles said.

Chase answered, catching up to his horse. "With a bit of practice, yes. How's about we'll play eye-spy when we're at our resting area. But your challenge will be equal to a sniper's."

Dexter chimed in, chuckling, "I'd like to see him try. How's about it son?" He turned, his red eyes meeting his son's.

"Sure," Miles looked around in solidarity to start preparing himself for their challenge. They were still minutes away from what Dexter said would be their turn into the pristine



pathway. Their way descended down, following the river rushing faster below. There's depth on lower ground, curving between the edge of a rising hill and a low-lying bank where desert plants thrive. And further down they saw the river widen, leading to a path laden with greener plants, and a few wildlife grazing amongst them.

"Now don't make a lot of noise, we don't want to scare them off." Dexter said to them.  
"Don't talk till I do."

Chase and Miles nodded, keeping their mouths shut.

He then gestured to Chase specifically, pointing forward at a shallow part of the river where it created a pool on what seemed like a submerged path. He directed his finger along his perspective; it's Ricky's suggested path. It was subtle as grass grew in between where one stepped, and it led upwards to another cliff, as opposed to the other path that continued downward.

Their horses whinnied and neighed along the way. The wildlife were suspicious of their presence, looking at them with stiffened bodies. A herd of deers that were munching on different bushes paused. A kit of foxes hiding behind taller grass, keeping their heads low but muzzles between the blades to not lose sight of them. Eyes followed their every move just before they crossed. Foxes would curl their tails around themselves, deer raising their heads and nothing more, and turtles nonchalantly moving along the river unperturbed. They would then cross over, hearing the gentle splash as water ran between their horses' hooves. Misty water sprinkled close enough to their shins to cool them down.

Miles kept his body firm and calm as they passed by. He turned his head ever slowly to Chase who wished he could be taking photos. As they went further away, they resumed grazing on the patches of grass, and the unknown berries that had been growing under thick shrubs; a lime green color that is as small as a blueberry.

Once they were far enough to not disturb them, Dexter said, "Good job boys. I like that." He smiled at both of them. "And good girl for not panicking," he reached around her muzzle and fed her a sugar cube.

"Can I have one, dad?" Miles opened his hand out and caught it, feeding Silver his sugar cube. "I wish we could take him home. Seems like a good pet to have."

"Horses are expensive to maintain, son. Got to feed them, have their own stable, their own pasture to eat in. Regular home grass is not enough for them."

Chase added, "And these guys are specially bred for racing. Right, Dex?"

"That too. We're riding premiere racehorses who need their daily walks. We're happy to oblige them for that."

That explained a lot of the discipline and the endurance, Miles thought. It was still quite generous of Ricky to allow them these horses in the first place. Maybe his father did something more than just being a friend. But maybe he'll ask that later.

Their special path gave them a clearer view of the way below; a wider river that travels past the horizon, wedging between a distant mountain range. Chase took photos of this landscape, especially with the river splitting into forks, as did the grasslands on both sides of the banks. He and Dexter saw a lot of the wildlife moving in between them; species they've encountered before. They told Miles about them who could make out the obvious creatures like the deer, and even a small fox den not far off. Though farther on the left fork he can finally see a smidge of civilization as a highway road has created a bridge over it before going further, and the one on the right leads to a basin that was used by a water purifying facility with a wide fence perimeter to keep wildlife away.

And this already-amazing view was about to get better. Once they were at the peak of their trail, they found themselves on a massive space littered with rocks and grasses, with a

particular granite boulder earthed into the ground. They can see the start of their trail, the ranch, which surprisingly extended past the barn where a small path led to a neighboring farm, and a small compound that Dexter had explained was a shooting range. But beyond these vestiges of civilization were massive untouched clearings on uneven ground that stretched onto mountain ranges. There were small elevations that considered themselves mountains, whereas others were hills. And the farthest one he could see peaked with snow, astonished that there were higher places too.

Miles' ears perked at that, asking, "Does Ricky have revolvers?" He turned to him, "Have you shot a revolver?"

Dexter nodded, "Yes on both, son." He got off his horse and procured a small ground pin and a hammer. "He showed them earlier, but I've fired one long ago. A military-styled revolver, called a 'Rex' I think? But I haven't shot a cowboy one." He hammered the pin to the ground next to the largest patch of grass he could find. Then he tied the reins to it, loose enough for the horse to move around but not far enough to go off on their own. Chase and Miles tied their horses to them too, brushing them after.

Once Chase was done, he took more photos of their surroundings, and took a good swig of their water too. The sun was about to hit its peak in the near cloudless skies. He took photos of the sky, the distant airport in which they arrived, the ranch where they were staying, and the water purification plant as it was the only other out of place facility in a land full of farms and ranches. And afterwards he took candid photos of father and son talking about the horses yet again, bonding over brushing them.

They settled themselves down by the dug-in boulder that had 3 stones large enough to be seats. Dexter noticed a knife engraving on said boulder with the initials 'ARF', and he could surmise that this was Ricky's personal spot. Given its view, and the calm surroundings, this would've also been a good place for stargazing.

Chase sat down and unpacked their lunch. He gathered a few stones, ones that were flat enough, to place their tinned meals on them. Miles on the other hand walked around the perimeter, testing the limits of his perception. He covered the top of his eyes, watching the surrounding world thrive; apart from the wildlife, cars drove down the roads. Some speeding down, others were haulers making deliveries, and a few horseback riders like themselves. He called over his father to impress him.

And Dexter was, smiling, patting him on the head too. He would present a challenge: find the tortoise.

"A tortoise? Out here?" Miles narrowed, looking past the ranch in great astonishment. How could his father see something that would be small from this distance?

Dexter simply glanced down, seeing the moving shell along the start of their trek. He pretended to look far for Miles' challenge, snickering to give off clues that the answer was, almost literally, under his nose.

"Where is it?" Miles kept searching.

It went on for five minutes before Dexter laughed out loud and finally pointed it out to his son, dumbfounded and facepalming after. But he gave him a pointer, "You always have to examine from your very feet all the way how far you can see."

Miles nodded in agreement. His father was the New Moon Sniper after all.

"Next challenge. Find a coyote." Dexter eyed one walking beside the road much closer to the ranch. It remained near the road, walking below it along the side. Often stopping whenever a car passed, looking over its shoulder. Almost like this thing had horrible experiences with civilization.

"I see it. Walking on the road," Miles pointed out three minutes later. Though he was unsure if it had been a fox. It was too large to be one.

"Next, deer."

And it would take Miles four minutes longer because he mistook several pronged cactus like their antlers. He found the one Dexter referred to moving through the open desert, from bush to bush. It probably sensed a cougar.

"Lastly, find a wolf." Dexter said simply with a monotonous voice.

"A wolf out here?" Miles looked at a wide arc, edge to edge of his peripherals. His father grinned, almost like it was an easy example. It wasn't down the road the coyote walked on earlier. It wasn't by the creek where their trail started. There were cars going down with wolf people in them but that wasn't what his father meant. Maybe there was a shape of a wolf in the formation of bushes and trees?

"Miles," Dexter called out to him.

He turned to his father looking over yonder, "Yes dad?"

"You already see the wolf," Dexter squinted more.

Miles turned to where he was facing, squinting too. "Where?"

"You lost him."

Miles turned back in disbelief. Where was this wolf that he kept talking ab— His cheeks went flush with embarrassment, and puffed out hot air.

Chase snickered in the background as he started setting spoons into their tins.

Dexter laughed and patted Miles' shoulder, "You found him." And they pulled each other into a hug. Chase took a photo of the moment, and another of their food.

Despite the desert heat and the smell of dust, they can easily separate it from the aroma of Azenu's cooking. As savory as last night but the presentation is different. The Fennixes gathered around their eating spot, looking into their silvery tin to find an appetizing stew of marinated beef, vibrant carrots, large chunks of potatoes, with a heaping helping of peas and beans all mixed into one. The other tin was a Nevada special that Azenu worked to perfect; a Basque Cheesecake. It was only after they had eaten their stew that they realized it wasn't creme brulee. A dark brown top with a gooey and cakey inside that melts in your mouth.

"That pro— what was he again? He can cook." Chase complimented, patting his satisfied tummy.

"Protogen, Chase." Dexter completed, helping himself to a spoonful of his cake. "They're rarer than dragons as far as I could tell. But they're normally sweet. And it extends to this dessert." He turned to his son, "What do you think Miles?"

Miles, mid-chew, nodded with how sweet it is. The right amount of subtle saltiness from cheese coalesced with the creaminess of the dairy, with the sudden pause of the burnt surface so it doesn't overstay its welcome. A great mix.

They drank themselves a good swig of water, and prepared themselves for the photo op. The sun had tilted well off the center, the mid day turning into an afternoon. Light bounced off the stone enough to shine their faces under the cowboy hats.

The next moments were spent wondering which mountain range best suited for their background. But after failing to decide the side that had Ricky's home, the river going in between the mountains, or the *sierra* with snowy peaks, they decided to alternate with all three.

The first set, with Ricky's home in the distant backdrop, would consist of your stereotypical cowboy poses. Miles started with one from an old show with his legs wide, his left foot tilted to the side. His arms were tucked close to his shoulders, and his hands were finger guns pointing along the direction he stepped. Next would be a standing pose, one hand on his hips, and another was his fight finger gun pretending to be holstered, and in the next shot pointed at the camera with his right heel tilting itself against the stone.

His father followed after, tilting his hat for the camera. And then he spread his legs, leaning back with his finger guns drawn out, facing beside the camera. Lastly, he pretends to howl, body puffed up with his maw facing the sun. The moisture on his snout and lips glint from the intense sunlight.

Chase had the simplest for this set, sitting down on the ground, looking over yonder towards the snowy mountains. He decided to admire it more, reminiscing about home. How there weren't trees surrounding them. Next he took off his hat, and fanned himself with how hot it was.

They gathered together, reviewing their photos on the camera. The combined shade of their hats managed to cover the screen, making it visible enough. Dexter was impressed with himself as usual, Miles feeling a bit shy after seeing his exaggerated poses. Chase liked his own but felt it could be better.

Chase said, taking hold of the camera, "Family photos next, Dex?"

"Yep," Dex held Miles by the shoulder and led him towards the river backdrop. But they stopped in their tracks, gesturing to Chase to come over. The panther snagged a few photos of two Little Birds, black spherical helicopters, flying low to the ground and kicking up dust into the sky as they went towards the airfield.

Once the dust literally settled, they continued with their group posing. The first would be back to back, a Fennix staple for all their albums. Next, they both pointed a finger gun to the

camera, their farthest eyes closed, which was a more creative pose than the last. They both then tipped their hats together. The same wolves, the same red eyes, the same family, only difference being their pelt.

Dexter then encouraged Miles to do a Power Rangers pose, followed by him and Chase, and all three of them. For once his son was shy about it, seeing his fur stand, almost like he was afraid. His own parental instincts kicked in, holding the young wolf, "Everything alright?"

To Miles, he thought about how goofy it looked, especially having to do it without their Power Ranger costume. His confidence wavered and looked side to side, trying to suggest something more practical or within the thematics of the wild west. The heat sweltering in his chest was not the ambient temperature anymore, and felt shameful.

Dexter told him then, tilting his son's hat up to meet his eyes. "There's no need to be ashamed about having fun, my boy." He turned to the town of Hawthorne. "People out there have fun in their own ways. People who dress up like cowboys, and act it out more than we do. No one's getting hurt if we do this."

Miles nodded, but his embarrassment was undeterred, "Can we not show it to Ricky, please?"

"Son, we won't, okay?" He winked at him in assurance. "But if he somehow stumbled upon it, he won't belittle or make fun of you at all. You're having fun, right?"

"Yeah," he said.

"That'll be his take away; that you're having fun. And he and his guys will applaud you for it. The same way that Chase and I are having fun with you too. Look at us," he gestured to himself and the black panther. Both middle aged men approaching their forties, shirtless in cowboy outfits under the heat with black fur, and simply bonding with their son. "We're soldiers



and if anyone dares to hurt your feelings, we'll punch 'em." Dexter clumped his fist as an emphasis, making his son giggle.

Miles eased that initial heat dissipating from the simple pep talk. He'd been overthinking it. It was just a pose, nothing more. Maybe it was because his face was visible here and it made him shy, but reflecting back on how he looked in his first set of photos? They were pretty badass. He nodded to his father, "Okay, let's do it."

Miles smiled, beaming with confidence as he split his legs and pressed his boots into the dirt. He raised and pivoted both elbows, moving his left arm forward, where his right stayed in place, hands resembling sharp claws. And what normally hid under a helmet, he bore his fangs and snarled against the lenses.

Dexter approved of his ferocity, "Show your fangs more. Show your true wolf."

Miles growled, his upper lips raised as a guttural noise escaped in between his shiny sharp teeth. He panted as his body pumped with hot air, and had that urge to howl and yet there was no moon. And his next pose would be a reference to the Silver Wolf Power Ranger, bending his left knee as he leaned in that direction, followed by bending his right arm into himself and over his left, akin to a martial artist.

Chase took more photos, then gestured to Dexter to join on in. His father mirrored the same pose, growling under his teeth too. And afterwards had his own harrowing display; elbows tucked into his side as he showed his teeth more, as if to pounce on the camera man. Miles, inspired, joined in with the panther laughing behind the camera. Because to him, it looked like two of them were going to take him down in a flash of black and white.

In a sweet turn, Miles offered to take photos for Chase and his father. The sniper squad posed with a mock arm wrestling competition, showing off their strong arms trying to overpower the other. Next is a fistbump, and they exchanged determined stares with the same competitive smirk. Their shared history, after all, was that of competition, yet professional at

the same time. And lastly a brotherly hug, arms over each other's shoulders and curled up fists beating against their backs. After Miles took a photo, his father and uncle invited him into a group hug, full of laughter and smiles.

But they weren't done. Chase took the camera and set it on a timer. He instructed Miles to stack up stones in any way he can to create a stable platform. They used their lunch rocks from earlier for it, allowing the three of them to post together as a family. Miles in the middle pointed his finger guns forward, whereas Dexter on his right and Chase on his left pointed them in their respective directions, almost like breaching a room. And they all did Miles' favorite set of Power Ranger poses, with their claws raised, resting just below their eyes. They'd want their enemy to see their dedication amidst their skill.

And the last photo today to cement the start of their vacation; they turned around and looked over yonder with Ricky's ranch in view.

"Thanks, dad." Miles said to his father, hugging him as Chase started packing their things.

"Of course son," Dexter rested his chin on his cowboy hat, patting his back. And he gestured over to their horses, "Let's get them cleaned up and go back to the ranch before other people show up. We're allowed here but I'd rather not stir up the idea that we're trespassers."

Miles nodded and hurriedly grabbed the brush from his horse's saddle, and got right on it. Silver stamped on the ground, liking the persistence and care he received, leaning against the young wolf when he was finished. He then asked for another sugar cube, seeing that his father had had a big bag of it the whole time.

Silver got a piece, and he tried one himself out of curiosity. It was sweet on the chew, and it did help distract him from the heat. Once the other horses were cleaned, and that his father and uncle were ready, they went on their merry way. Downwards from the hill, and

through the small river crossing from earlier. But all the animals had left by then. He missed them already. Going back familiar paths made the trip seem shorter than it was going to their destination. But it did speed up once they were out of the Wilson Canyon's main entrance, to the surprise of a few visitors who looked at them with curious wonder. He saw his father tip his hat to them, but seeing as he himself didn't know how to, he simply tilted his downward with a slight bow. Chase behind him waved at them goodbye.

"We're going back to the stables, and t o the shooting range after where we'll pay Ricky a visit before we drive back home to the ranch." Dexter said to them.

Miles leaned forward and aligned with his father on the side of the road. "I can't wait."

"If he lets you, son. We're still guests, so if he lets you, he lets you."

"Right." He concurred. Still, his chest pumped with excitement at the thought of firing a big iron, again. But if not, then maybe he can ask for his father's permission back in Canada instead. "So why aren't revolvers common anymore?"

"Humm..." Dexter thought about it for a bit. "It's about efficiency. For a revolver, you have to reload one bullet at a time, but for a common handgun like the M9, you already have a magazine that holds up to fifteen." He wasn't done. "Old revolvers aren't as configurable, and don't fire as quick as a semi-auto. Y'know the hammer we pull back on a handgun?"

"Yeah?"

"You have to pull it back each time on certain revolvers. Certain ones don't but reloading them takes long all the same."

"Ooooh. So all the revolvers now are custom made or vintage? Like a collector's item?"

"Not always. Sometimes they're still used by law enforcement because your typical criminal won't always have a gun. And if they did, a more powerful response would be called upon. But soldiers definitely don't use revolvers anymore. It's been phased out since World War Two."

"That long ago."

"Yep," Chase added. "That long ago."

Miles noticed that they were riding past the ranch. Azenu was probably still inside. "Maybe we can refill our canteens first?"

Dexter and Chase together said, "That's actually a good idea."

And they circled their steeds back around and into the ranch. Knocking politely on the door where Azenu met them with glee, and were invited into the kitchen for a glass of iced tea and home baked biscuits.

Miles liked them because they were fluffy and airy, and it goes well with the sweetness of his drink. He watched Chase hand back the backpack he brought, and Azenu swapped its contents with the instruction of bringing them to Ricky this time around. The protogen sure speaks highly of his partners, hearing him talk about their time at the special picnic spot a lot. It did confirm his suspicion that it was a great area for stargazing. He listened intently to Azenu talking about how visible the stars were, and how they twinkled from behind the mountain ranges, peeking over the horizon like the sun as the Earth rotated.

But Azenu had to stop himself, admitting that he had a habit of talking on and on about the things he loves. He sent them on their way as he started preparing their dinner for tonight: good 'ol American Hamburgers.

They made their way to the stables after. Miles saw the great farmlands, a contrast of green from the typical brown, or the faded plant life amongst the sands. Crops that were close to being harvested. "What time are we gonna wake up tomorrow for the farm work?" He asked his father.

"Oh?" Dexter was surprised but impressed by his initiative. "O-six hundred. We'll be milking them by hand."

"Doesn't sound difficult." Chase said.

Miles nodded. Seemed simple from what he'd seen in movies and shows. But what he did know was one shouldn't drink it directly or risk a sort of disease because it hadn't been pasteurized. But it would be an easy fix by simply heating it. He didn't expect a highschool lesson to actually aid him right then and there. "What else will we be doing?"

"I don't know yet." Dexter shrugged. "But he'll like your enthusiasm, son."

"Thanks."

They arrived at the stable fifteen minutes later with Ricky cleaning his car. He waved at his friends arriving, "Dex, Miles, and Chase! I trust you found our spot?"

"Yep. It's a nice area for a picnic." Dexter said. "Just left before other people started trekking."

"That's good. Hopefully none of you scared the wildlife?"

Miles answered, "Nope. They were quite peaceful."

"Excellent!" He moved forward to rub Midnight's muzzle. "Lead them to the stable, and we'll take a trip down range. I wanna show you all what I've been practicing on."

Miles grinned ear to ear at that. He kept his excitement by taking another swig of his water. He led to the slot that had Silver's name on a plaque that was made of silver. "Your horses are well behaved, sir Ricky."

"Just Ricky will do, and yeah. Breeding the best racehorses in the county." He said. "But if not for racing, I was considering them for the local authorities. Have them act out like actual sheriffs."

Miles got off his horse and Ricky stepped in to help him remove the horse's saddle and other harnesses before Silver started feeding on the hay under her. The hybrid then led them to his car where he was letting it dry, fetching a weapon's suitcase from the trunk.

Dexter then said to him, while they were walking to the range, "Why don't you ask him what's inside?"

"Is it a revolver?" Miles asked immediately to the adults chuckling.

"Not only a revolver." Ricky patted the end of the case. "I got a repeater in it too." He looked at Dexter, "Going to teach your dad how to lever it."

"What's a repeater?"

"It is a lever-action rifle that fires small caliber munitions. It's like pumping a shotgun, but instead of pump, you pull a lever that fits into your knuckles. And when you 'lever' it, it's like firing a gun in rapid succession. It only depends on how fast you can pull on it."

Miles saw his father raise a brow, apparent to him that he too learned something new today.

"It's hard to do something while you're aiming down sights." He heaved the suitcase and aimed down its handle like he would a rifle. "But that was how the old west was like."

What Miles didn't notice, however, was Dexter exchanging glances with Ricky, then both looking at his son. The latter mouthing 'Oh, I see.' And nodded.

Ricky then asked what Miles had been waiting for, "How's about it *jjo*, wanna fire a revolver?"

"Can I?!" Miles grabbed his father's arm for approval.

"Of course," Dexter patted him through his cowboy hat. "What's a cowboy who's not fired a revolver?"

Miles understood it as a right of passage. "What's the recoil like?" He asked Ricky, his mentality and muscles recalled the earlier memory of being in a gun range where he fired a pistol a few years ago.

Ricky said, "I'll let you borrow my Cattleman Revolver. It has a kick to it so I won't let you one-hand it, alright?"

"Okay!" Miles' tail wagged fast, dusting the dirt behind him.

"While your father and uncle will be given a Winchester 1873." Ricky raised a finger adding a nifty point to this fact, "Both your guns will be using the same ammunition too. And don't worry, I'll showcase the rest in the coming days. Maybe you guys can have a shooting competition with Fierro. He's the better shot."

Now that was something Miles would've wanted to see. A shooting competition between soldiers of different armies. He would costlessly wager his father winning easily. But

since Ricky was going to showcase more guns in the coming days, maybe he himself could fire from a repeater too? Try out that so-called 'levering'.

The shooting range that Ricky had been using looked like an old stable. There were multiple hay bales painted with target signs right outside the building, and scarecrow stilts inside.

Ricky explained to them, "This is where the old stable was." He looked at the structure and towards the current one that was a stretch away. "It was better closer to the road because it allowed us to move our horses more efficiently. And that moving trucks to drop 'em off or pick 'em up proved to be a hassle." He gave the weapon's case to Dexter and went to the stable to fetch a large table, which Miles and Chase helped him with as they brought it over to the edge of the fence where they were going to shoot from.

Miles peeked from Ricky's side as the hybrid opened the case. For old weapons, they looked well maintained and cleaned. Varnished wooden stocks, shining chrome, and pristine bolts that hold them together. There are two revolvers on opposite sides with the repeater resting in the middle.

"The Cattleman," Ricky lifted up one of them. "1873, single action." He twisted it to make it shine from the barrel to its frame, while keeping the barrel away from anyone of course.

He noticed the differences from the movies he's watched. There was a small protrusion located on the lower right side of the barrel. Ricky explained and presented the mechanism that ejected the bullet from its cylinder. The hybrid rotated the gun to show it to them, seeing that there was a small lock that kept it inside.

Ricky loaded one round at a time, letting his friends hear the click that locks the cylinder so another bullet can be added. He did it five more times and closed the cylinder lock. He pulled the hammer back; the gun was live. He held the gun with both hands for the youngster. He eyed the bullseye in the middle hay bale and fired.



Miles covered his ears to how loud the first bang was. It was louder than a handgun for sure, and its sound echoed farther. But to his surprise, it was only slightly different from a regular handgun. He was amazed with Ricky's accuracy, seeing the shot afterwards land square in the middle of the red circle.

"But that's not all. I would like for all of you to stand back."

Everyone stepped back, and Ricky urged them all to his left. He twirled the gun on his right to holster it first. He unpins the hammer and spun the cylinder once. Legs spread open to distribute his weight; Miles knew what he was about to do. The hybrid raised his arms, but his right hand flexed his fingers about to grab his firearm.

Miles only heard the gunshot that came after, stunning him aback as Ricky had fired from his hip, hitting within the inner ring of the target. His father clapped first, then he and Chase after.

Ricky then brought the gun up and positioned it in front of him while gesturing to Dexter and Miles to take over. And of course Chase beside him already prepared the camera. His father took the gun and unpinned it for his son before passing it onto him.

"Just like a pistol," Dexter said to him. "But expect the kick to be stronger."

"Okay," Miles eyed down the small nub at the end of the barrel. The varnished wood on his hands was smooth, unusual for any gun he'd held before. He closed an eye to focus down, tightening his grip, and distributing his weight through spreading his legs to best control the recoil. Finger then on the trigger, Dexter standing back while holding his shoulder.

"*Buena suerte*, Miles," Ricky said.

He pulled the trigger, feeling the inner mechanisms of the gun turn and spin as the pin hammers the bullet inside the cylinder. It fired with a kick twice as the handgun he had fired before, but mitigated most of it. His shot was within the outer ring of the bullseye, seeing the third shot pierce through the hay. And when the loud bang subsided, it was filled with cheers from his father and uncle, and Ricky applauding him.

"Good shot, *ijo*," Ricky notioned him to hand the gun to his father.

Miles accomplished his rite of passage as a cowboy, bestowing that honor to his father next. He stepped back, watching him unpin and aim within the moment, and this time with only one arm. With firing that shot, Miles noticed the amount of smoke pluming from the barre, his father lifting it close to his lips and blowing it away like they did in the movies. His shot was on the corner of the bullseye, but he had more flair than the hybrid.

Chase stepped up, passing the camera to Ricky. Dexter wasn't done with the theatrics, twirling the gun in the air before he offered the handle first to the panther. He accepted it, spinning it much simpler in his hands, then unpinned the hammer once he aimed it at the target. It was another short quiet before the next shot rang out.

At this point, Miles had gotten used to it. Chase returned the gun to Ricky who was not to be outdone by Dexter's display. He started twirling the gun as usual, and he tossed it into the air in a spin that he caught with his other hand. Motions of his fingers were so fast that he barely missed the unpinning of the hammer as he spun the cylinder once again, and then tossed it behind him, before catching it without looking. And he fired from the side of his hip, twirling the gun into his holster.

"Now that's a show right there," Dexter clapped.

Miles followed suit. Ricky was a true cowboy in his eyes, "Do you bring your revolvers during your tours?"

Ricky scoffed and patted the young wolf's shoulder, "Oh I wish. It ain't allowed. Logistics, kiddo." He unholstered his gun and placed it inside the weapon case, swapping it out for a Winchester Model 1873. He showed how to load it up; a small slot where the same type of cartridge went in. And compared to the revolver, this one holds fifteen while having an easier reload. For Miles' benefit, he essentially said it was like a shotgun but you pull on the lever just below the trigger and gun stock to load in the next round while unpinning the hammer too.

Miles had to step back to watch Ricky not only fire it, but lever the weapon too. When he fired it, the gun was not as loud as the revolver, and upon pushing the lever with his middle and ring finger, he saw the spent casing eject, as the firing pin was pushed back into ready position. And he fired again.

Ricky passed it to Dexter who fired it twice, and then Chase after who fired the same amount too before receiving it again. He reloaded six rounds and urged his friends to stand aside. He fired, levered, fired, levered– the process of loading one shot after the other had been streamlined with how fast the lever moved. From the hips, with the ease of his arms, it was almost like an automatic rifle.

And he had to display some theatrics too; pushing with the momentum of releasing the gun, causing it to spin in place before he fired it again. Miles applauded first at that.

The young wolf looked at the hay bale riddled with holes. It showed that levering wasn't as accurate from afar. And though cool as it would be, compared to weapons they had in modern times, it was only half efficient compared to now. But he digressed in his reflection. The bottomline of that afternoon was that they were all cowboys then.

Ricky had put the guns away at the time, urging Miles and his father to join the hay bale barely standing on its twigs, while Chase set the camera up for their quick photo op. It wasn't anything too fancy then; Miles crouched besides the target with his father hugging him, Ricky holding onto his target, and Chase standing aside, resting his shoulder around him.

*Today...*

Miles finishes the photo album labeled 'Shooting Day' on his phone, with several more albums that have more photos inside them once he's zoomed out. And he looks at his surroundings, and everyone's either knocked out drunk, or just chatting the night away like he was with Dan. His father is conversing with Chase, exchanging laughs, and he turns back to the lion who nodded at his little story.

"That's cool, I've never used weapons from the Old West." Dan finishes the only drink he's had so far, because he was quite intent in listening to Miles' story. "But that was a good story you told there. I think I've heard of Sergeant Furgo too. But he's retired I think? Or I might be thinking of his partner."

"How? He and my dad are about the same age." Miles raises a brow in surprise. He's so good with weapons, what had happened to him?

"He got an injury in Afghanistan. He's got fractures from being tossed after an IED, which almost made him unfit for military service. That said, one moment." Dan gets up and walks towards the bar, fetching a bottle of scotch and two shot glasses. He pours one out for each of them, sliding one over to the Halifax Reaper. "How's about we drink one to him?" Lifting his glass in solidarity.

Miles sighs yet feels happy, imagining that past the worry that Ricky's gotten hurt, he's relaxing now somewhere in his ranch with his partners. That's a sweet ending to have. Hope they're all doing alright. Hell, maybe he can pay him a visit, show him the tricks of fanning and levering this time around. "To Ricky," Miles raises his glass to meet with Dan's. "And to us for Silent Lightning."

"Hear hear!" And they both downed their shots in one go.

Miles feels the hot buzz kick in and warming his veins. He still remembers that old power ranger growl as he shows his fangs, and that old urge to lift his head and let out a howl with the specks of scotch escaping his lips. His father joins in, Chase joins in, even Dan and anyone else who isn't knocked out drunk joins in too.

And when the room's mellowed down, knowing they'll be reprimanded tomorrow for unsolicited howling, Miles takes another shot and laughs it off, then continues where he left off.

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