

Another Frontier

1881

The news about Canada buying the entire United States back in 1867 still baffles Chase. Remembering as if it's yesterday; the panther sits in front of his half-eaten English Breakfast on the table in a town inn, and on his second refill of coffee. Suddenly this young poster beaver charges through the doors chanting: 'Canada bought the US!'. Silence follows, remembering the patrons staring at each other in the same disbelief he felt. There's some laughter initially because of how absurd this all is, then others share an embrace as tears of joy well up in their eyes.

He remembers staring at Dexter who stares back at him in utter disbelief too, "Wow." It is the only thing he says as their lips curve upwards. Everyone erupts in a loud cheer altogether. Then the mass emigration weeks after; himself, Dexter, his wife and child, Alexa and Miles all venturing into newly claimed warmer territory.

And that last sentiment is an understatement because this place is a scorcher. The Americans call it 'California', and the Canadians add 'New' before it so they are officially in New California. This is ten times hotter than Vancouver in the summer, and he always has to be shirtless as soon as the sun rises from the horizon.

With the sun already high above in the blue, cloudless skies, a topless Chase is tending to his stallion of matching fur color: a black Mustang named 'Wes'. Miles jokes about calling him 'West' because it is where they go after all. He'll admit it has gotten him to laugh the first few times, but his stallion starts answering to it too and he may as well go with it altogether.

"How're you feeling, Wes?" The panther brushes the dust off his horse. Just because they're far from civilization, doesn't mean they're savages, or so Alexa keeps reminding them. Which reminds him that he has to give him and himself a bath the moment they get back to the ranch tonight. The heat's one thing but the smell he and his horse reek off was starting to bug him. Same goes for his outfit; blue wool trousers with brown leather chaps; and the dashing accessories of a cowboy: black shoes, a red neckerchief, and a gray cowboy hat. They could all use a good scrubbing, or he'll never hear the end of it from Alexa.

Wes neighs back unabashed, shaking his head to get rid of the bits of dust. Though he continues holding him in place to clean him better. This is something he does on a daily basis to keep his mind off the monotony, given there is nothing but sand, cacti, rocks and valleys. No sign of the natives, nor bandits fortunately enough. Not even a vulture, which is a good sign too.

After minutes of stroking the horse's fur, Chase procures two white sugar cubes from his chapps' pocket, "Good boy." He offers it below its lips, "You deserve this." And Wes happily eats it, neighing afterward. The horse takes his gentle pats kindly, neighing again as a response, then checks behind the cabin to see if Dexter and his son are visible at the horizon. The landmark toward their ranch, in the direction between a shrub of cacti and a mountain-shaped rock formation, is missing two wolves on their horses.

He checks his cabin which has little shadow on either side; it was noon. Then he steps in under the shade of his small wooden home and takes a seat on the chair he left out. "Can't wait for lunch, so would you two please hurry it up," he says to himself, lighting a cigar. The harness bar is enough for leg rest, and it's not like Wes needs to be tied down. He doesn't like it anyways, preferring to roam free. Besides, and this is something he brags about, his horse always comes to his whistle.

His patience comes back to him in the invigoration of burnt leaves, then he keeps the tobacco in his mouth as he unsheathes his revolver. Good 'ol single action medium barrel with a six-bullet cylinder. He pushes it out and starts loading it with bullets from the back of his belt. It isn't fancy nor powerful but it's enough to scare some of the scoundrels around here. No kills with it but he hopes to never see the day when he has to.

Then he huffs and puffs a few more before closing the cylinder and holstering the weapon on his hip. The thought about the 'wild' west comes back to him. Lack of patrolling marshalls, more bounties on the town boards, the occasional distant gunfire, and silhouettes over the hills are some of the things he has witnessed. And he recalls the unfriendly wildlife such as feral vipers and cobras which sends a shiver down his spine, nearly imbalancing him.

“Damn snakes,” his boots hit the board then props himself up again. “Can’t even shoot them easily, how does Dex do it?”, he puffed again, jealous of his friend’s crackshot abilities. Dexter was another reason he feels confident about venturing this far: because that wolf can hit anything that’s not behind cover with the same revolver.

Tobacco wasn’t enough to stave his hunger any longer. His stomach growled ferociously, loud enough that Wes looks at him then steps back. Only if someone’s here so he could say ‘I’m so hungry I could eat a horse’, then chuckle to himself because it is a good joke given the context. He won’t say it to Wes because he loves his horse.

The cacti that grow near his house are enticing to eat, knowing it has water and fruit inside. There is this one survivalist he encountered back in the town of Appledale who presents to the crowd a few ways to survive in the desert with just a knife. Something about cutting the branches of a cactus then peeling off its prickly skin, with a taste of regular water. He never got to try the fruit but they say it’s like a flavorless melon.

To his relief, he hears approaching gallops from behind the cabin. Maybe he should sit himself up but he already has a good seating position. Then their approach jerks a memory, remembering the other thing he has to do: provide a saddle. And to further remind him of it, the shirtless Dexter and Miles come around the corner, the latter who sits on a saddle-less horse.

“Hey Chase,” Dexter greets as he spins his stallion in place. The brown horse he rides in is Victor, an Arabian breed. This particular steed is envied by anyone he’s come across but Wes always hears his call. A horse’s trust matters more than just physicality, he thinks.

“Howdy, Chase,” Miles adjusts his posture, and taps on his horse’s side to stop. Its white mane reminds him of all the snow in Canada’s forests yet it’s called an Icelandic steed. He doesn’t even know where Iceland was, would that be the arctic that he’s heard about? ‘Why would a horse from an ‘ice’ land be in the desert?’, he ponders. So many questions he’ll ask Dexter in a while.

“Howdy partners,” Chase taps his forehead, then gestures a point towards their direction. But first things first, “Did you bring lunch?” On cue, his stomach grumbles loud enough that Miles’ ears twitch and their horses glance towards him. “My apologies.”

“Sure did,” he presents him with a small tin box on a metallic handle. It got Chase off his seat and over the harness bars. The panther walks towards him, dropping his cigar and stomping along his way, then reaches forward with an outstretched hand. “Watch it, Chase, it’s hot,” Dexter leans with it towards him, holding onto the horse with his other hand.

“Thanks,” he takes it, still feeling the heat on his knuckles, which his stomach begs even more to eat there and then with his bare hands. But as he thought earlier: he is no savage. Plus it is the right time to fetch the saddle too, “I’ll go get the harness and saddle then.”

“Thanks Chase,” the younger wolf says as he watches his godfather step into the cabin, leaving the tin beside the entrance.

“So what’s his name?” he steps out with the harness around his neck, the saddle on his shoulder, and the most important of all: his spoon. Looking to the dismounting Fennixes whereas Dexter catches a falling Miles. The latter whose gun falls out of its holster. “Ya alright Miles?” both older men asked simultaneously, with Chase rushing to his side to set him down easy, and picking up his gun with his spoon hand.

“I’m fine, thanks,” he pats the white horse, “His name is James.”

“James, eh?” he passes the saddle and harness, “Well here’s his new riding equipment.” which the young wolf hauls the harness over his shoulder, and the saddle over his head like a cowboy hat.

“Thanks, Chase,” the young wolf puts the saddle on his horse then the saddle over it.

“And your gun,” he offers it sideways, his stomach growling to remind him of an uneaten lunch.

“Actually,” Dexter interjects, “you got spare bullets right? The miss doesn’t like loaded guns in the household, and I’m out of extras.”

Chase rolls his eyes then offers a counter, “Your tobacco then, for six shots.” And bullets are cheaper than one smoker too, so points to him.

He smirks at him, pulling one out from Victor’s saddlebag, “Aight, you win.” Then he disembarks, offering the dark brown stick of joy. “I’ll help my son with James.” They turn to Miles trying to fit the harness around the white stallion’s muzzle.

“Thank you, good sir,” he thanks the older wolf, picking the cigar from his hands. It feels new, and he gives it a whiff which has a very smoky and blissful aroma. Then back on his seat, propping his legs back up on wood. He lights it up then enjoys a few puffs first. Whatever Dexter got is very fancy because it has a sharp, nutty taste, and the smoke doesn’t smell like it’s burnt. Definitely worth the six bullets, which he removes from the back of his belt then starts loading Miles’ gun. The two wolves almost have James ready too. Hopefully they give him time to eat.

“Is it secure on the other side?” Dexter asks his son who is crouching underneath, securing the middle harness while adjusting the stirrup iron to be at his proper length.

“It is now, pops,” he answers standing back up. Then he secures the leather around the dee ring, making sure it too is secured.

“Good, almost done here too,” he adjusts the steering harness around its head. Securing it without being tight, plus he is a delicate horse.

Chase pops another question, “So Dex, how much did you have to pay for such a majestic stallion?”

“Four hundred dollars, man,” he pats the fancy horse gently.

That’s an impressive price, “Wow,” he says taking it in. “From Iceland, right?”

“Yeah, wherever that is,” Dexter inspects the horse on that sentiment, the country’s name baffling him.

He only knows of Canada in the far north, Mexico to the south, and her majesty's London to the far far east. Either way, this horse has travelled a long way and that normally isn't cheap. Especially as an adult steed capable of exploring these unknown parts. "When'd ya buy him?" he asks, offering the gun sideways to him. "Your son's gun, Dex."

The older wolf walks over and takes the gun, "Thank you, hope the cig is to your liking," then passes it to Miles with a mimicked sentiment.

"Fancy stuff, this is," he takes another puff as Dexter explains.

"Remember that stable all the way back in Manchester, and I saw this beaut of a horse? I thought it would be a good coming-of-age present for Miles, especially that his fur matches his." He glances at the horse again, this time Miles is brushing James' fur, "Last month I sent a telegram to the guy there and lucky enough no one had bought it."

As fortunate as he is accurate, Chase says "Maybe just because it's from Iceland, they thought it's meant for the snow, but he seems fine out here."

James shows no sign of discomfort nor thirst, nor his rider who gives him a sugar cube. He neighs in satisfaction, then Miles rubs his nose, "Good boy."

"Thanks for the spare equipment," Dexter offers his hand, and the panther sits up properly to shake it.

"No problem, thanks for the lunch," and the invigorating kick from his tobacco no longer suppresses his hunger.

"Well ya better eat it before it gets cold," though his tone dies at that last word realizing where they are. "Nevermind."

Chase chuckles as he puts the lunchbox on his lap. It's warm with a very inviting smell, "What is it?" he asks. There's hints of spiced beef, carrots maybe, but most definitely potatoes.

“Alexa’s classic beef stew but with extra portions because she misses ya,” Dexter leans forward to watch her unveil her cooking. Then a strong smell attracts them both, even Miles glances at them. That hint of meat and vegetables earlier has become something savory and sweet. Smoke is still puffing out from the inside, and he looks into his lunch with a spoon in hand.

Chase saw the generous amounts of cubed beef, diced potatoes and carrots swimming in thick brown broth. There’s even a garnish of chives on top of them, and he squints closer to see some peas coated in it. He then fixes his cigar between his fingers holding onto the tin box before digging in. His spoonful has a bit of everything, then after putting it into his mouth comes a blast of complex flavors. The soft potatoes have an herb taste to it, the carrots taste sweet, and the soft melt-in-your-mouth beef compliments the aforementioned seasoning with an addition of something that’s tangy. His stomach is silenced within moments as he starts getting his next spoonful.

“I’ll tell Alexa it’s good,” he then goes over to check on Victor who is chomping the grass that Wes was about to eat. The black horse snorts in annoyance, while the brown stallion neighs as he chews on.

He hears Miles asking his father, “How does he like mom’s cooking?”

“Loves it,” and they glance at the panther who was eating with his tail wagging.

He tells himself that if he ever finds a lovely woman who he will call his wife, that her cooking must be just as phenomenal if not better. Because even the broth has a distinct taste, a blend of salty and savory that keeps him wanting more. That means he’ll tag along with Dexter later in time for supper, hoping that the satisfaction of this lunch would linger until then.

“How was it?” Dexter gives James and Victor a stick of carrot each which means they are going out soon.

“Exquisite, man,” leaning back in satisfaction. Just savoring it for a hot moment before he joins them, “Give me five, then let’s go.” Then huffing a smoke after is similar to

indulging in a smokey dessert. All that was missing then would've been some whiskey, or moonshine since there were no marshalls in these lands.

“Alright then, you want me to give West a carrot?” with another carrot in hand. Miles behind him chuckling. That joker.

“Call him Wes, then sure you can,” he answers back, putting the spoon in the lunch box then aside. After exhausting his tobacco desert, he gets up and stomps it in the sand. Lunch box in hand, he goes to his stallion still munching on that carrot. Then he stows it on him, then puts on his harness, “C'mon Wes, we go West.” And Miles chuckles again.

Wes neighs, and puts the harness on with little effort. That's his obedient Wes alright. Gun, check, harness, check, stirrups, check. He gets on the horse, patting his side, with his horse neighing back as he usually does. Then he turns to Dexter, “Thanks, again. Where do we go now?” Holding onto those reigns, and Wes responding under it; they are ready.

Dexter points towards the southwest, a long desert before another distant mesa. It has a bright brown top but there seems to be green at its base, which means water. That will be worth plenty if they could find a water depository, or even a river.

“You sure we're not going towards Mexico?” Miles asks, squinting towards the mesa too.

“Not if we get there first we won't,” Dexter laughs, as does Chase.

“Then let's go, cowboys, he-ya!” he yanks Wes in that direction and they are well on their way. Dexter and Miles catch up to his head-start. Victor, being a renowned Arabian horse, holds back because his Wes and his son's James aren't as powerful as him. Nonetheless, the Icelandic steed is able to keep up and maintain a good stamina, and if not for the black saddle and chaps, Miles would've looked like he's part of the horse itself. And Wes is a Mustang, he needn't say more. It's most likely second to Victor too, but much more loyal without a doubt.

The desert wasn't as harsh given that they speed through it fast enough it's as if they are caught in a breeze. Chase catches sight of sneaky lizards skirting through the sands and underneath dried out bushes, but no snakes nor signs of travel. His best friend looks around for any unwanted eyes while his son looks forward towards their goal. It seems they are the first through these lands but it isn't suitable for the fine civilization to settle in.

"How far till we get there, son?" Dexter asks looking behind.

"I'd say five minutes more, dad." He answers.

"Chase, is it just us here?"

"Yeah Dex," he glances side to side once more, "no one's been here but us. No wagons, no horses."

"That's good, and weather's been clear too so we're good."

Their chatter is minimal because these parts are not kind to trivial engagements. He has heard of stories about campers being attacked by masked fiends, or ferocious creatures that stalk them in the night. Rumors of mountain lions and cougars roam about these parts too, and he doesn't even want to think about the goddamn snakes. At least the objective ahead keeps it off his mind.

The mesa draws close, and then they notice a slight decline in the terrain. Their excitement encourages them to move closer. "Please let this be a gorge," Chase hopes as Wes gallops beneath him. The sun's heat doesn't matter now, nor do the cramps from riding still if he and his friends find a river. That slight green from the mesa's base continues to stretch down the cliff, and then he sees its coast: a wide river.

"Guys, I see a river!" he says to them. Yelling will only invite unwanted company and no way will he let others steal their group's discovery. Then the gallop turns to a trot as he reaches the cliff. Dexter and Miles only moments behind.

"Holy shit, jackpot," Dexter's amazed at the sight of a wide river with greens on both sides growing from it. There are pronghorns grazing among the bushes too. Chase glances

further north to see where the river leads and it seems far, then the other way to see a lake towards the canyon with the gap in between widening.

“I see a lake,” he points his excited shaking hand towards it.

“Nice,” Miles cheers, giving James another sugar cube.

That lunch earlier is one thing, but nothing will top this. Chase and Wes trot over to Dexter and shake his hand, and Miles afterwards. He gives Wes three sugar cubes then, and pulls out a notepad to start detailing this beautiful piece of land. It is, without a doubt, very habitable and will be populated in a year’s time. Who knows, maybe he’ll meet his wife here.
