The cake is a lie, and so was the Frontier.

A lie Spencer embraced with both eyes open, because it wasn't even a good lie. 'Your New World Is Waiting'. 'Build a better tomorrow on the New World. 'A New World. A New Beginning'. Terrible taglines for a sad and underfunded campaign that spanned the course of two decades. At first, it'd been all the rage to call yourself a budding pioneer making ready for the New World, and it kicked off a whole sub-genre of new shows. The Majestic Six. Dr. Quiley, Magical Woman. Little House on the Frontier. Even the Lone Ranger got a remake, and Spencer watched them all because he wanted to know more about what it'd be like.

Because when Spencer was seven, he watched the live broadcast of the Advent and dreamed of one day stepping through to the New World himself. Not because he wanted to build a new life, escape to the 'safety' of the New World, or live out a real LARP as a cowboy or whatever. No, all he wanted was to know what it was like to go through the Gate, one that shimmered into existence before his youthful eyes on the same CRT television he watched his morning cartoons on, a portal that blurred the line between fantasy and reality for Spencer ever since.

What would it be like to start over in a New World? To take part in shaping something different and almost wholly untouched? To

leave the troubles of the world behind and just start fresh? To explore new lands and claim a piece of it for himself while working every day to make life better for everyone around him?

Then a few years passed with no sign of the Second Wave in sight, and the world got tired of hearing about the New World. There were too many issues to deal with at home, so it got easier to punch down on the settlers than hope for the best. It was probably the Sampsons, or maybe Family Dude who took the first swing to clown on the New World dream, because they both did episodes on how terrible it'd really be to start life on the New World.

There was even a dark joke in one that sparked a lot of controversy with the Christian fundies. Some guy goes to get a tooth pulled at the dentist, and the bill was like $2 or something, and the customer asks, "Can I pay you in livestock?" The Dentist accepts, and it cuts to a scene in his ranch where he counts out the customer's seventeen cattle and two daughters who were gonna be the Dentist's new wives. Not the best joke in the world, not even all that funny, but it showed the grim view that most people had of the New World, where those with skills lorded over those without as they all regressed to a barbaric level of medieval serfdom or ever slavery. It also kickstarted a whole slew of shows and movies about just that. A Million Ways to Die in the West was Spencer's favourite, but there were plenty of gems out there and he'd seen every last one.

Even the one about the two gay cowboys that was better than he expected. He still liked women, but it was an interesting movie all the same.

All this to say Spencer forgot all about his childhood dreams and set about making a life for himself here on earth. Which wasn't easy, even though he knew other people had it objectively worse. His parents were together, neither one was an alcoholic or druggie, and they didn't beat him or his little sister Sally. There was always food in the pantry, money for school events, and even the odd gadget, gizmo, or tower PC when he wanted it. The only issue was that their parents didn't really get along. No, that was an understatement. They hated each other and were always arguing about this or that until they could barely sit down to dinner together. He had no idea why they didn't get divorced, because they were always butting heads. Dad was rigid, controlling, and practical to a fault, while Mom was passive aggressive and resentful while never missing an opportunity to shame her husband or kids in front of friends and strangers alike.

To make matters worse, Dad was former military, but you wouldn't know it from looking at Spencer. Dad was built like a brick house, 6 ft 2 with shoulders so wide he needed to buy tailored suits and shirts for work because the big and tall was either not big enough or too tall for his sizing. He was a man's man, all football, boxing, and high-octane action movies. Spencer was built like a pile of mud with all the structural stability that came with it. He was all of 5 ft 6 and loved his Saturday morning cartoons, a phase he never really grew out of, not even after graduating to anime, video

games, and MMORPG's. He wasn't the smartest kid in school either, or the hardest working, but his grades weren't bad. Straight A's, but low A's. with a solid 80 average. Good enough to pass muster, but not enough to stand out, which meant it was never good enough for Dad.

"Eight out of ten means two missed questions," Dad would say. "You know where I'd be if I only hit eight out of ten shots? Six feet under and buried in the Gulf."

Wasn't good enough for Mom to brag about either, so she harped on him instead. "Why can't you be like Jemma's kid?" She'd ask. "He gets straight A's too, but he also participates and makes friends." Or, "Your cousin Tiffany's already got her driver's license and she's almost a whole year younger. I don't understand why you're making such a production out of it." Then it became, "Other boys your age have girlfriend's Spencer, or God forbid wives. You're never gonna find a nice girl to settle down with if you don't find a girl first."

Sally didn't have it any better, but Mom liked to play them against one another, so it wasn't like Spencer got along with his sister any better. Nowadays, he didn't think Mom did it on purpose. She wasn't maliciously manipulating her children so they wouldn't band together against her; that's just who she was, and she never learned how to be any different. Same with Dad, and while Spencer though things would change when he won a National-level Arcana Engineering competition with his

autonomous terrain mapping Automaton that could operate independently for a full month so long as it had easy access to sunlight. Before it ran out of power however, it would either make its way back home or failing that, fall dormant so it could power its locator for as long as possible so a team could be sent out to retrieve it and the precious cartography data saved on its crystal drive.

Winning awarded him with $10,000 cash, but Dad just snorted and said, “People will pay anything for toys these days.”

Mom was worse. “Just ten? Penny’s son won twenty-five thousand and a full ride to Washington tech.”

So Spencer went out and applied for scholarships and financial aid, leveraging his win to take his first year from almost $40,000 down to a grand total of $10,000, but again, it wasn’t good enough. “That’s ten-thousand dollars, Spence,” Dad said, frowning at all the prepared literature which he hadn’t even bothered to read. “We can afford it even without the finanacial aid, but at five thousand a semester, you better work hard and get something out of this.”

Mom was even worse. “Did you even apply to Standford?” Because that’s all she cared about. The name of the school, not what he’d be studying, and while Standford was a strong contender, it was also on the other side of the country, and

Spencer had long since lost his sense of adventure. MIT was close by, and he figured he could save money by living at home even though no one really asked him to. No one encouraged him to leave either, because dysfunctional as their family might be, they were still a family.

And they stayed that way while Spencer went and got his Bachelor's in Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences. Problem was getting a job after the fact, one that wasn't over in Washington's Emerald Corridor where every tech start-up in existence wanted to be while competing with the Métis over in California's Silicon Valley. Took him a year of job searching to land an interview, and even then, he'd needed help to do it. Dad had to call up some old friends and pull some strings to get him an interview with the DoD as a civilian Arcana Technician making $45,000 a year, meaning he'd make enough money to pay his parents back for tuition in about 4 years if he didn't spend a dime.

Meanwhile, Sally went to Wharton on a full ride and came out with a Bachelor's in Economics, which scored her a job as a management consultant specializing in operations and logistics with McKinsey. Mostly because her first-year roommate and eventual best friend's dad was a V.P high up in the food chain. Started Sally off with a $75,000 salary not including bonuses which bumped her up to six figures for her first year, and only went up from there. Gave Mom a new target to compare Spencer to, who's first year raise saw him making less than the year before if you accounted for inflation, meaning he was still living at home

while little sister Sally was putting a downpayment on her condo in picturesque Pittsburg, the city of Industry.

After two years of working, Sally even had enough disposable income to take the family out on vacation, an all expenses paid trip to Switzerland. One of safest countries in the world, and equally expensive what with how expensive airfare had gotten, but Sally could easily afford it after her latest bonus and promotion. Spencer was so ashamed of himself he lied and said he couldn't take the time off because there was a big project going on. There wasn't. Just the same old stuff as before, mostly prep for the Frontier because the Army wasn't being funded well enough to really take on anything else. Most the money was tied up in defending Florida and the great plains from Aberrations, while Spencer was mostly checking Script and filling out paperwork while sitting in meetings where he was never expected to speak, and mostly spent the time doodling in his notepad to look like he was paying attention.

Which is exactly what he was doing when his phone buzzed mid-meeting while his parents and sister were on their way to Switzerland. A phone he was supposed to leave at the door because operational security and all that, but no one cared. Not unless you got a call and interrupted some military big-wig mid rant about something or the other, but Spencer was beyond caring. He just got up, walked out of the meeting room, and answered his call like it was the most normal thing in the world, except nothing would ever be normal again.

Not after July 16th, 2007, when the airlines called to inform him that the 747 his family was on had been taken down by Aberrations.

He didn't remember much else about the day. It was all a blur as he sat there in shock watching the news report on the tragic accident that befell the 414 passengers of Scandinavian Airlines Flight 144. There wasn't even the remote chance of survival, or any chance of recovering their bodies. Everyone on board was declared dead right then and there, and there wasn't anything that Spencer could do. Nor did anyone expect him to do anything, as the airline had called to assign him an agent to walk him through it all and make sure he didn't have to figure it out for himself. The Army big-wig even patted his shoulder and assigned him a counselor while his team leader Phil helped with the investigators who were just going through the motions same as Spencer.

Because he couldn't stop wishing that he'd been on the flight with them, even if all he could do was die alongside them. Just the night before, he'd been sitting in the dark living room with Dad and watching the game, when a commercial came on and he said, "You don't actually have a work thing, do you?"

Seeing no reason to keep up the lie, Spencer just shrugged and said, "No."

Dad grunted. “Thought so.” Then a pause, followed by, “Wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, seeing Switzerland. Might as well see some of the world before Abby takes it all.”

Which was Dad’s way of saying he wanted Spencer to come. He hadn’t noticed at the time, just shrugged and said he was tired, to which Dad said, “You’re 26. You’re supposed to be tired. This is when you work hard and build the foundation for your future.” Then the game came back on, and Spencer left a little while later when it was clear Patriots were gonna lose. Went into the kitchen for a drink, where Mom was on the phone doing some last-minute bragging. “It’ll just be the two of us and Sally,” she said, looking at Spencer as she talk. “Our boy’s too busy with work to take a trip with his parents. Lord knows with what because he never tells us anything, and it’s not like they pay him enough to run him ragged like they do.”

They didn’t. The DoD was actually pretty laid back. Spencer just spent most of his nights staying up late to play WoW, CS, or his favourite obsession, Gnome Citadel. That’s what he played last night, late enough so that by the time he woke up, his parents and sister had already left for the airport. Meaning his last words to Dad had been, “I’m tired,” and he couldn’t even remember what he said last to Mom or Sally.

Couldn’t even bring himself to cry about it. Not until it hit him a few days later and he came apart at the seams. Stopped showing up

for work or answering the phone and door, and just sat at home gaming or watching shows so he'd never have to think about anything at all. Did that for a good while, just running on autopilot without anything of significance happening at all. The only friends he had were online friends, most of whom didn't even know he'd lost his family because he wasn't one to talk about them, and that's what he needed. Normalcy, something to provide barrier between him and reality. An escape and outlet even, but as the days turned to weeks, then months, he realized he couldn't keep it up, because sooner or later, reality was gonna catch up.

Then he saw an ad for the New World. It was every bit as dumb as the rest, but this one grabbed him. Maybe it was because he needed something to believe it. Maybe it was because he wanted to do something that his parents would be proud off. Or maybe it was a caffeine overdose and eighteen hours of continuous gaming giving him a minor stroke as he sat in his chair. Whatever the reason, when the gruff and stoic narrator said, "History doesn't remember those who watched it happen", Spencer was reminded of his childhood dreams and went online to sign up to settle the New World.

It was stupid and spur of the moment. He regretted it almost immediately and tried to cancel, but you had to show up and sign some forms before that could happen. So he pushed it aside and ignored the emails and phone calls until the Military Police showed up at his door and arrested him. Apparently, the online sign up wasn't just, "Hey, I'm interested so tell me more". It was a full-on contract filled out with a click. Granted, he had to add a

photo of his driver's license and provide his Social Security, but even then, he didn't take it all too seriously until the MP's dragged him to the closest base and made him go through all the standard checks. They ran medical tests, had his sit with a shrink, made him fill out forms and asked him questions about his friends and family. The last part was mercifully short, but throughout it all, Spencer kept expecting he'd get drummed out for being overweight, asthmatic, near-sighted, or one of a thousand other reasons why he wasn't qualified for the Frontier.

They didn't. Instead, they put him through basic training, and even gave him a 'personal trainer' to ensure he got through it. Which was really just a bald, burly drill sergeant named Greg who yelled at him until he did what they wanted for the next four weeks. Spencer tried to quit by just walking away, but either the guards at the base wouldn't let him leave or the MP's dragged him back whenever he got out. Tried to do it right and fill out the forms too, but when he gave them to his 'personal trainer' to sign off on, Greg looked at the papers, looked at Spencer, and said, "I'm gonna be real with you Spence."

Spencer hated being called Spence, but he was too afraid of saying as much, so he just nodded. Not that Greg needed permission, because he was a Ranger through and through, the cream of the crop and deadlier than every one of Spencer's characters in WoW combined. "What have you got to lose?" Greg asked, and the question threw Spencer for a loop. "You got no girl. No family. No friends. No job. You don't even have a dog." Spencer was more of a cat person, but Greg didn't care. "You

don’t have anything going for you,” Greg continued, his tone cold and matter of fact rather than angry and spiteful, “So what do you have to lose?”

Spencer didn’t have an answer for Greg, and he knew it. The other man waited a beat all the same, then signed the papers and handed them back. “Man like you could make a real difference in the New World,” Greg said, once the papers were back in Spencer’s hands. “Educated Arcana Technicians are probably in short supply over there, as well as single, eligible young bachelors. Anyone can dig holes or lay lines; not as many can do what you do son.” Greg paused, then said, “Before you hand those papers in, I want you to ask yourself one question. Why’d it take you four weeks to get around to filling out those forms?”

And with that, Greg walked away, leaving Spencer with an answer he already had, but just never really considered until now. He didn’t do it because deep down, he actually wanted this. Wanted a clean slate on the New World to get away from all this. To start over fresh in a world that still had hope, and make something of himself. So he didn’t turn in the papers, just tucked them under his bunk and went to bed, then woke up and showed up for training the next morning. Finished his eight weeks and got his certificate that said he was New World qualified, then went home to the dingy darkness that was his childhood home.

He kept up with the training too. Did his push ups, sit ups, and went on runs while also combing through forums from preppers

and other would-be settlers who were planning out how they'd go about it. Most were just there to play out a fantasy without any intention of actually going, but that didn't mean their ideas were no good. Spencer settled in, came up with an action plan, and started workshopping how he'd put together clothes, tools, and weapons his first day in the New World and the rest of his life.

A plan which came crashing to a halt as soon as he stepped through the Gate and found himself in an alien forest of white grass and leaves under a bright red sun.

It was almost like walking into an old western movie, where everything was coloured with a Sepia filter. The colours didn't look like they were real life, with too much yellow and red everywhere even in the whites, but the air was cleaner than anything Spencer had ever smelled before. Wasn't colder, but it was cold enough to send shivers down his spine as he set to making sure he'd survive here on this fresh, new world. He started a fire easily enough, as there was plenty of dry wood and part and parcel of training was making sure everyone had the Ignite Cantrip. Granted, Spencer had a fair few more Cantrips and Spells Prepared, including a nasty Second Order Mind Spike which he could use to injure and track any prey or Aberrations that might try to hunt him.

He had other Divination Spells too, ones meant mostly for diagnostics, but he wasn't all that great with them since he preferred to use tools. They were more accurate after all, so why

put the effort into learning how to do something worse than a $5 gadget from the hardware store? Granted, there were no stores in the New World close to where he landed, so he was wishing he'd practiced those Spells and Cantrips a whole lot more, or went whole hog into Conjuration in hopes of picking up the knack for Minor Conjuration. Let you Conjure up small items or whatever on the fly without need of a Spell or Cantrip, because there was no Cantrip that let you do that. If he had that, he could've Conjured up a multitool to help him move on with his checklist, the first of which was putting together some clothes to maintain his dignity.

It seemed so easy in training. Take two long strands of grass and just weave them together. One over the other until you got a braided belt, which you then slip more strands of grass into and wrap around into a skirt. Simple enough, but here in the new world, the grass was tough, but surprisingly easy to rip if you pulled on it in the wrong way. There was a trick to it, there had to be, because there was white grass all over the mid-latitude band of the planet, because something about the angle and the light of the sun combined with the atmosphere made white better for photosynthesis than green. He didn't understand it, and suspected no one else really did either, but he knew it was good for making skirts same as green grass up north or purple grass further south.

Except he couldn't make himself a skirt. The grass kept tearing after weaving the strands a few times, and he couldn't figure out why. Was it too wet? Too dry? To young? Too old? Would shorter strands be stronger? What about longer ones? Was he using the

wrong kind of grass? Were there better plants to try? Eventually, he gave up on clothes when his hands started cramping and decided to go look for food and water, but a short patrol around his fire just uncovered more forest, with the trees so thick the floor was dark and murky even with the sun shining high in the sky.

So Spencer did what he always did when things got tough. He gave up and sat down as close to his fire as he dared and wished he was back home playing video games in his room. Wouldn't be any of that moving forward, because there wasn't any internet out here. Wasn't even any television, much less video streaming sites online, but he'd made his peace with all that. Mostly. The real issue was the fact that he was probably going to freeze to death, because if the days were already this cold, then the nights were going to be worse, so he might as well try weaving a skirt again, or look for some bigger leaves to smoke and dry so he could make some shelter in the meantime.

That's what he was doing when he ran into the blue-haired girl. Looking for leaves and sticks and whatever else he could find to build some sort of shelter, only to jump out of his skin when he saw her looming over him on horseback. It was crazy how she managed to get so close without making a peep, like a frigging ninja straight out of anime. Granted, the girl was Qinese, not Nipponese, but she was still stealthy as shit. Severe too, glaring at him from atop her massive fanged horse while four more followed close behind. She was gorgeous, there was no denying that, a surprisingly young to be riding around on her own. Was dressed for the part though, wearing a cowboy hat and a fur-lined

muffler, as well as a metallic breastplate that did nothing to cover her curves despite being solid steel.

She also had a pair of chains lashed to her waist, as well as more knives that Spencer could count without using his fingers to keep track. Guns too, but somehow those were less terrifying than the exposed blade of her sickles just sitting there on her thighs.

So Spencer did what anyone would do when faced with what could only be Republic secret police here to capture settlers of the Second Wave and pump them for information. He ran.

Or at least he tried to, only to trip and fall flat on his face. Then the girl was on him, and not in the happy fun time way either. He tried to cast his Mind Spike and got kneed in the ribs for it, leaving him gasping and whimper as she hogtied him on the ground and stuffed some rags into his mouth. Then she just stood up, crossed her arms, and glared at him like it was all his fault before stalking off to patrol the surroundings.

She didn't ask him any questions. Didn't check his health. Didn't warn him about doing this or not doing that. She just walked circles around him while the horses sniffed him a little bit before leaving to munch on some foliage. Then a Qinese boy dropped out of the skies, landing lightly in front of Spencer while trying not to look too upset or amused as he spoke with the thickest southern drawl Spencer had ever heard in real life.

“So uh… what’s happenin’ here, Hoo Dieh?”

No wonder the girl didn’t question him. She was mute. Her fingers flashed and Illusions shone as she answered in ASL, and then the man introduced himself as Howie and cut Spencer free. They weren’t Qinese secret police, or working with the Republic at all. They were just two kids who’d come out to look for settlers and help them get to town safely. Which was wild, because the preliminary reports said that travelling throughout the new world was still wildly dangerous, with most people staying close to home or travelling along well-worn routes that were guarded by Rangers.

Because Aberrations mostly, though there was talk of lawless, Independent Territories as well as the aforementioned Qinese secret police who captured all ‘foreigners’ and threw them into work camps to use as political leverage.

That’s why Spencer said what he did about Howie and …not Hooty, but close to it? Whatever her name was. Either way, they had to be pretty competent all things considered, though Spencer was starting to psyche himself out and wonder if he was reading too much into it when the whole town of Coal Crag turned out to shake Howie’s hand. Apparently he went on a one-man rampage and saw off an entire army of 10,000 Abby all by himself. Howie claimed he didn’t do all that much and that the Rangers saved his bacon in the end, but the townsfolk weren’t buying it. They

nodded along like ‘Yeah, sure buddy’, and acted like it was par for the course for Howie to be doing some sort of heroics.

Which it was. His prosthetic hand? He got that because he lost the real one fighting a biker gang that was producing chemical explosives in the desert north and east of here. Then he took on a bonafide Mafia family that had the whole mountain under their thumb until he showed up in their home base one night and killed their second in command, Frankie the Phantom. As for their boss, one Ignazio ‘Firebrand’ Pugliano who everyone spoke of like he was the devil himself? Sacrificed by Nahuatl fucking Cultists, as if things weren’t bad enough.

Howie wasn’t a cultist though. He just had a big honking polearm with a Nahuatl saw-toothed blade up top because just this past spring, he went south for some government job and ended up clearing out a whole Nahuatl Cartel. Took the polearm off their leader after killing him and most of his siccarios, again all by his lonesome with little to no help at all.

Which was just fucking crazy. If they made a show about Howie’s life, it’d be raked over the coals for being unrealistic. Sure, Howie was 19 going on 20 come December, but that was still way too young for someone to have the skills he’d need to do all that he’d done, but he barely even had any visible scars. Before he took off his glove, you wouldn’t even know he was missing a right hand because he’d worked wonders with his Automaton prosthetic,

enough to make Spencer marvel in disbelief despite seeing it right there in front of him.

It was one thing to Script an Invocation that allowed an Automaton to act independently while scanning its surroundings and measuring everything it could down to the millimeter. That was easy, because even though there were a lot of variables to take into account, there were only so many things you needed the Automaton to do. It needed to map and move. That's it, so if it ran into water, a sheer cliff, a tangle of growth, or whatever, you just had to have something that told the Automaton to back up, turn a little, and try again in a different direction.

A hand though? There were infinite possibilities because there were infinite degrees of freedom required of a hand. Each finger didn't just go forward and back. They had some side to side to play too, about thirty degrees for each finger. Then there was the thumb, which hinged inwards and out for even more degrees of freedom, to say nothing of the wrist. All of which had to work with simple commands because no one looked at a cup and thought about what orientation to put their fingers in. They just picked it up however they wanted to, of which there were many different ways. You could hold it like a cup, or stretch your hand over the mouth to hold it like that, or pinch it between thumb and forefinger to hold onto the thin surface. There were still more scenarios that only had to do with cups, so the amount of Scripting required was monumental, more than what any one person could do on their own.

Except Howie did just that, and did it well enough that no one could tell it was an Automaton. Soon as they were free of the crowd and on their way to the quay, Spencer got off the Floating Disc and started jogging beside the younger man so he could pick his brain about the Scripting. Thankfully, Howie was more amused than anything else and all too happy to share his methodology, one which blew Spencer's mind and then some.

"I don't have an individual Invocation for each and every action," Howie said, making a face like he thought Spencer was an idiot but was too polite to actually say it. "I started out like that, and it worked okay, but I had to spend a lot of time memorizing the right Invocations and practicing how to use them. Eventually, it got to be too much of a hassle and unwieldy to boot, since custom Invocations are tailored to specific items and objects. The whole process was unintuitive too, and no good for anything outside of regular, everyday life. Took a cue from Mage Hands instead, and wrote up one Invocation that tracks my brain waves and uses those to control the Automaton instead. Makes it feel more like a real hand than an Automaton I gotta direct, and I got a whole slew of other Invocations to help me smooth the process along as needed."

Which was just brilliant, but Spencer had no idea how to even start. Howie claimed he didn't come up with the idea or even the original Script, as he copied it off of someone else's work and modified it to make it work for him. Wanted to Script something to

take the input from Detect Magic or some other Detection Spell and organize it for him so he wouldn't have to commit all the different feedback to mind and remember what they indicated. Which was how those cheap $5 gadgets from the hardware store did it, except those used computer chips that wouldn't be available on the Frontier for at least another decade if they started work on a fabrication right now.

Meaning Howie had found some way to hack his own brain and use it to run software for him. "Do you know what this means?" Spencer asked, then continued without waiting for an answer. "This could revolutionize… everything. We all have a supercomputer sitting inside our heads, so if we can learn how to harness it and use that to our advantage, we could change how we do things from the ground up. Imagine copying a pre-written Invocation into your Script that can tell you exact measurements of anything you're looking at, or can calculate the bullet drop from a rifle that shoots a Bolt at eight-hundred metres per second at a target one hundred meters away."

"Seven point seven centimetres," Howie replied, and Spencer blinked as his train of thought came to a grinding halt. "That's how much it'll drop," Howie explained. "A hundred-meter range at eight hundred meters per second is aught one two five seconds of travel time, multiplied by aught five multiplied by nine point eight is aught zero seven seven meters, or seven point seven centimetres."

“…Did you already Script an Invocation to help you do math?” Spencer asked.

“No,” Howie replied, looking offended to even be questioned. “It’s simple multiplication Spencer. Anyone can do it. Look. Hoo-Dieh, what’s the drop on a Bolt moving at ten-twenty-two meters per second over three-hundred meters?”

The girl’s fingers flashed as she wiggled her fingers, then again a moment later as she gave her answer, and even Spencer could understand she was saying 42.2 centimetres. To which Howie gave Spencer a triumphant look, one that made him sit down to do the math in his head. He needed Howie’s help to remember certain numbers while he mathed out the rest, only to arrive at the same answer an embarrassing amount of time later, at which point Howie gave him a look and said, “Might be time I stopped sayin’ I’m Frontier born and Federally educated.”

“I graduated from M.I.T,” Spencer replied, but even he knew it wasn’t worth bragging about.

“I’m sure that’s a very fine school,” Howie replied, only to add, “I stopped goin’ after I turned eight though. My daddy thought there was more important things I could learn out on the Frontier.”

Feeling all of two inches tall, Spencer retreated to the Floating Disc and sat back down beside Travis who was still offended because they happened to be on different sides of an argument Spencer didn't really care about. What did it matter if there was a president or not? The world was going to hell in a handbasket anyways, and it wasn't like things had changed much for him. Granted, he heard about horrible things happening in other states, like massed detention camps, deportations, labour violations, and more, but he wasn't an activist. He was just a guy trying to keep his own head above water, a task that had been difficult even before losing his family. As for Travis, he was pretty much the poster boy for high school bully, so similar to the ones who made Spencer's youth miserable and did things that haunted him to this day.

They sat in blessed silence for all of five minutes before Travis couldn't take it anymore. "Can't believe you're a fence-sitter," he muttered, spitting the words out like a slur. "An appeaser's someone who feeds a crocodile and hopes it eats him last."

A popular talking point that was ironic for all the wrong reasons, seeing how Winston Churchill was using it to talk about dealing with the Nazis, whose ideologies had quickly been taken over by the Bureaucrats. Most weren't malicious, and would probably argue against Nazism in general, but they were also brainwashed by news pundits and naysayers who'd turned American politics into team blood sport over the last twenty years. Spencer just sighed, because he was tired of it all, tired of all the politics and arguing and caring about what happened to anyone, including

himself. Howie was at least interesting, and surprisingly civic minded for a kid steeped in American stereotypes yet self-identified as a Frontiersman.

While going full vigilante on any criminals in his vicinity no less, as well as being a dyed in the wool Aberration hunter. One who had his own village it turned out, because that's what the quay was. His village. Not in the sense that he lived there, but that he owned most of it, and sold off parts to the other people living there. It wasn't a big village, maybe eighty houses in total at most, but there were a whole lot of people settling in for the night when they arrived. There was most of a log wall, with signs of a complete one that had burned all along one side, but otherwise it looked like a place that would've fit right into the suburbs of most towns. There were plenty of visiting workers and labourers too, people who came down from the mountain, or from across the lake the village was built alongside, one with a gorgeous, golden red sheen as the sun was setting over it.

It was nice. Idyllic even. Gorgeous views and simple life with people all coming out to make sure they had enough to eat while asking for news from home. Howie left them to fend for themselves, and being one of only two Americans and the more pleasant of the bunch, Spencer was left to answer a whole slew of questions from the curious village folk. Who was the last president, what happened to him, why hadn't they held any elections since, and so on and so forth. While Spencer would have thought rural folks like these would side with the Bureaucrats who mostly left people to manage themselves, he

saw that Travis' ideologies were rubbing people the wrong way even though most Bureaucrats ate that sort of thing up.

Not so with Howie's neighbours, who asked the same kind of questions Spencer would, to which he could only shrug because he didn't have the answers. No one demanded a vote because things weren't bad enough. Yeah, some people got killed during protests, and still more were brutalized by police after the fact, but that wasn't an issue for most. They were employed, well fed, and had roofs over their heads, so why rock the boat any more than they had to? Especially with Abby closing in on all sides, tearing through Florida, the great plains, and possibly down south too if South American fell to the Merlocs.

Thankfully, Howie wasted no time getting them a berth on a ship. At least, that's what he called it, but Spencer figured a berth would include somewhere to sit. There was barely room enough for them all to stand as they squished into the dark and tightly packed corridors of the cargo ship, one where the walls were just cargo covered in canvas and lashed down tight. Least, Spencer hoped it was lashed down tight, because if anything got loose it was gonna crush them all. He tried not to think about it, or how Howie had waved him off when he said he wanted to talk more about his Scripting, to which Howie just wrote his mailing address onto a piece of paper he tore out of his notebook and stuffed into Spencer's hand.

“Once you settled in, you write me a letter with whatever questions you have,” Howie said with a ghost of a smile and a pat on the shoulder like an older man pacifying a child’s curiosity. “Might take awhile to write out the Script, but I’ll see that it gets to you one way or another. Take care Spencer, and best of luck making your life here on the Frontier.”

A life he wasn’t sure he wanted to keep after 4 hours in the hold of that cargo ship. Between the nausea, claustrophobia, and the poor decision to not use the bathroom before boarding the ship, Spencer was about ready to walk the plank when they told him they were docked and waiting to disembark. He barely made it off before finally throwing up everything he’d eaten, including a surprisingly delicious burrito given to him by a European woman while answering their questions. The food in New Hope wasn’t as good, but he needed something to settle his stomach. A shame they didn’t have any delicious horchata like what they had at the quay, but they got him a fizzy sarsaparilla which turned out to be root beer, so that wasn’t half bad.

While they were having their impromptu dinner and being debriefed by a number of clerks, a Ranger showed up with the sunburst on his shoulders, indicating he was a Marshal if Spencer was remembering correctly. He looked like a younger Sam Elliot without the moustache, well into his late forties but still carrying himself with a quiet dignity that reminded Spencer of his dad. He wasn’t the only one who took notice of the Marshal, as everyone sat up straighter when he approached, even Travis who seemed to have issues with authority among other things. The Marshal

introduced himself as Theodore Ellis, and welcomed them to the Frontier, while saying this or that about their noble sacrifice and how the Federation would do everything they could to get them off on the right foot.

Then he paused, and said, “You’ve all travelled a long ways to be here, but there’s still a little further to go, as we’d like to get started on your papers so you can be settled as soon as possible. To do so, we have carriages ready to bring you over to what qualifies as Ranger Headquarters here on the Eastern Front, but I feel it would be remiss not to warn you.” Taking a deep breath, he paused to reflect on some inner pain that was clear to see, and the mood of the entire docks dropped a few degrees. “Eleven days ago,” Marshal Ellis began, “We came under attack from the largest swarm of bugs we’ve ever seen, numbering well into the hundreds of thousands. We fended them off, but we paid dearly for it, losing the central and outer districts of our once burgeoning town.”

One which looked pretty well put together as far as Spencer could see, as they had solid stone walls protecting the docks and a double darksteel gate that belonged on a fortress, not a town gate. Inside, it looked nothing like Howie’s village with its neat and orderly rows of houses. It looked more like the Midwest, with houses plopped down wherever they fit with some semblance of order to begin with, but no overall pattern to it. Some houses sprawled out this way, others that, and still more clumped together like what one of their guides pointed out as the house Howie grew up in.

Guess he was Frontier famous, the Firstborn as it were. “If he grew up here,” Spencer began, furrowing his brow at the sight of this small, cube of a shack when everyone else had these big, ranch style houses, “Why’d he move out to the quay?”

The guide coughed, and stammered something before telling them about the house next door, which belonged to the stunning blonde woman named Rachel who lived at the Quay. Spencer noted it and pursed his lips, because while he was terrified of getting snatched up by Qinese secret police, that didn’t mean he hated or reviled the Qin. They were… an intense sort, with a culture that was wholly at odds with America, but that didn’t make them bad people. Nor did their authoritarian government do that, because let’s face it. With the way things had gone for America the last decade and change, they were in no position to point fingers.

It wasn’t until they arrived at Ranger Headquarters that Spencer understood why Marshal Ellis wanted to warn them. There beyond the clocktower stood a ravaged gate leading out into a ruined, war-torn district that looked like something out of a world war two movie. The houses had been shelled and burned leaving empty husks of roofless buildings behind, sitting atop ground that was stained in blood and Ichor. The devastation stretched out almost as far as the eye could see, and Spencer made out a ruined second wall as well as a possible third, while off in the distance sat the remains of what used to be a road, one that

would need more than cement to fill up all the holes. Even now, with the sun almost setting, there were people hard at work picking through the remains and tearing it down so they could safely build it up again.

Visually, it was all doom and gloom, without a single thing to stand out and brighten the day. Even in the untouched parts of town, there was a decidedly retro vibe all around, though there were street lights and sirens and a few other touches of tech around. No screens or neon signs to be seen, no cars or bicycles to get around, no speakers playing music or posters on walls. That being said, the people were not what Spencer was expecting, especially not in light of what they'd been through. If Massachusetts had been through an ordeal like this, there'd be looting and despair as people isolated themselves to stay safe and only ventured out for necessities, with a heavy police presence wherever it mattered and maybe even the National Guard coming in to help out.

In contrast? Marshal Ellis aside, Spencer hadn't seen another Ranger here in town. He'd seen a few guards in uniforms that looked less like police and more like private security, as well as a deputy who showed them his six-pointed star badge so they'd know who to look for if they needed it. Otherwise, it was just normal, everyday people dressed in simple, rugged clothes that looked higher quality than most mass manufactured outfits you could but at the mall. They didn't look all that fashionable, but they were quality fabrics and well-kept outfits that set them apart in a crowd.

Or it would have back home. Here, they all dressed the part, and even the rags given to them by Howie were pretty damn cozy. More than how they looked though, Spencer was amazed by how well they carried themselves, with backs straight and shoulders squared as they went about their work. It must have been devastating to see their homes and livelihoods destroyed like this, but the overall mood was less grim and more determined than anything else. They survived, so they would rebuild, and they were hard at work getting it done, a spirit of rugged perseverance he couldn't help but admire to see while knowing he didn't have that in him.

Then again, maybe that would change moving forward. Maybe the Frontier would instill some of that hardy determination into him and change him into a Frontiersman. And maybe pigs will fly, though from the looks of Howie's calf, it seemed like cattle already did, so who knows what the future had in store.

In truth? Spencer had come here simply because Greg was right. What did he have to lose? Nothing, but he had everything to gain, and for the first time since losing his family, Spencer felt like he finally had a reason for waking up in the morning. Ironic that it took losing everything he had to spur him to value what he could still do, so he looked up at the sky, and wondered if his parents and sister could see him now.

A new world. A new beginning. Here on the Frontier, where anything was possible.

Author's Note: This was a very difficult chapter to write, because I'm gonna be honest. I have trouble identifying with the sort of person that would go through with something like this. I could've taken the easy way out and made Spencer's backstory even more tragic. Honestly, the only reason I went through with killing his family off was because I didn't want his home life to be too troubled, but also couldn't figure out how to get him over the hump and through the Gate. All in all, I'm not thrilled with the character as he is, but mostly because I'm still figuring him out. If you got any criticisms or suggestions, even recommended reading I could look at to really understand this sort of thing, please let me know. I didn't think I'd struggle as much as I would, because in my head, I was just gonna use Spencer to quote the Simpsons and make pop culture references Howie will miss.

And I can't even remember enough relevant Simpsons quotes to throw in. Which is upsetting, but understandable seeing how the last episode I watched was probably more than 20 years ago lol.

I'll take recommendations for that too, so yeah. Hope you enjoy, and apologies if you didn't. I'll see what I can do about fixing the chapter in edits, but as it stands, I feel like it'll take a miracle to make this more compelling, but alas, sometimes ideas fall flat in execution.