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SPACE TORTILLA

By Cetan Copeland

Chapter 1

Soot. It is bitter this time, like an empty cigarette. Clinging like a failed refugee, crying as if the world wasn't listening. Heh, I wonder where she is right now. Were children always this damn noisy? How the hell did I grow up... damn you old man, and damn your old ratcheted pilot seat. Damn thing, wobbles like I am dying. Dead huh? I never got around to it before. Guess it is never too late to start. Better have some damn good liquor waiting.

The blatant wailing of machine and child mix as a rugged space drunk pilot plummets in untested skies. His rusted ship smoking like a barrel to the chamber of kings, flames dance from leaking holes, a persuading temptation. The fire sprites seduce untimely failures, slurping fuel for combustion, but now they wail beating against the windows, like banshees groveling before gods, they strain the ship. But gravity does not yield. It never does. Inside the prophet's tomb, the pharaoh closes his eyes, holding tight the smoldering bundle, a child with a head burdened by horned knobs of satanic vexation. Sound could not enter, now one last button, one never pressed but held a thousand times to trigger divine intervention.

A blast of air, a vacuum unlike any space, a pilot escapes the doomed fall, with a defiant grimace plastered like paint that never dries. The seat hangs, and for just one breath, the world

opens wide its bright green iridescent hues, and lavish wealth of bountiful greenery, a jungle of vivid life, the sound of a million lives mixed by the dense humid dew that wets his tongue. Wet before the inferno below continued. The ejection seat pitched forward, and his grip held tight. The orange recliner caught no air, not since last time, but his grit bore teeth. The last thing he felt was the very hell he damned, the very inferno he eluded all these years.

Blossoming on the other side of what is known, a planet meets for the very first time, a blazing human comet. A curious sapiens eyes follow what the heavens give. Da' Chuuk had seen the sky-star, and he had seen the sky-star drop from the greater-blue. Da' Chuuk knew he was not supposed to go alone, but Da' Chuuk hated the others. They always made Da' Chuuk weak in front of Sha' dee. Da' Chuuk would show them he was better after eating the life-giver. Da' Chuuk would show them that the sky-star was under him. Da' Chuuk, however, was surprised when the pain-hunger appeared, and even more so when he saw a creature lying in the pain-hunger. The green roared with the pain-hunger; it confused him, the stories of old that once confounded him, inkled in his brain. The sky-star of long ago was said to carry a hairless-one, creatures that could use the pain-hunger. Da' Chuuk also knew of the danger they enticed from the sky-father. But Da' Chuuk saw the pain-hunger open, like the great-sun through the blue-fall. The pain-hunger had never been so pleasing, so tempting, Da' Chuuk was not one to think. Da' Chuuk always acted on his tail, and his tail felt good, straight up and good.

Chapter 2

"Ave, if you're getting this, I'm already there. I'm sorry I did... did what I had to. I'm going to fix this- what she would've-" Her thin hand contorted around the small device, an archaic receiver of intolerably specific messages. The opal glove crunches through the mechanics. His damned voice was a silent hum. Disgusted, she throws the scraps onto her desk. A massive half arch of polished dragon bone, cluttered by pages, thick obsolete sheets of paper. Ancient guides to electronics and a pile of wasted scraps. His damn voice, all she ever gets from them. She stalks towards the door, her chambers a jumbled mess compared to her perfect composure. The shade, now missing from her brow, the twisted anger voided from her lips. "A captain can't have any blind spots." Or something like that, as her reflection smiles back. The tall mirror dredged from the pits of a golden star, its radioactive tang still imprinted in sheets of glass. She glances back; the clock ticks to 5, looks like sleep wouldn't fit in today either.

The crew clambers loudly, yet perhaps silently. The thuds are resounding but so distant; echoes carry the ghostly reverberation to the Queen's Roost. The slow slink of metal sheets welcomes the familiar stewardess. The slight old lady has aged like burnt parchment curling at the ends, textured by indefinite cuts, so quaint, her smile bursts through, wide eyes and a shaggy mop of hair. She enters quietly but looming against a door's silhouette dressed by business, her eyes wink as she tidies through the pantry door.

"No sleep again?" Her voice coaxes out a sigh, a caregiver's syrup to a coughing child.

"No, none, for now, the Highway rarely opens. The Luscious Dogs are still on our tail... It's about time we docked home. She is still waiting." Olmilla listens, but her face never looks up, fixed on a fading crack in the wall, her hands working with an inspired life. A light spark in the corner of her mouth hints at her disapproval.

"You got his message again, didn't you?" She begins, but the electronic shards lay tomblike as she passes over again, and the black-gloved fist clenches tighter. Something wicked drips from my eyes.

"The only message he ever sent." She growls. Her fuming voice, wavering anger like a tested slack in the storm. "The bastard that took my sister from this world. The bastard's name that stayed on her lips when she died." Olmilla, the babysitter of my mother, the stewardess of the Sky Dragoon, the ancient of life, smiles wide. She always does. Her eyes twinkle like a nursery rhyme. They always seem too deep. But time never lets them stay. There is always much to do.

As she turns back to work, now to seek forward. The exact path, the same steps, but different faces. The open transport line grinds to a halt, a step away, a new conductor today as well. He's short, scrawny, and heavily clothed. A hat droops the corner of his eyes, he looks up expectantly. My feet reach out again and find purchase as the transport begins its instantaneous drop. Thousands of feet in a second, the light buzz rises in my stomach, but we have already reached the main bridge. We always do. Open transport, they said, was far too dangerous. Was, however, works for me. It's time again to set a course. Always another course. At least it's moving forward.

Before her, the massive chamber lightens, a hundred stations waiting for attendants, while the enormous dome breathes space light. The cosmic radiance launders through the main bridge, and it rests on the Captain, Ave Wren, of the Sky Dragoon. She calls herself, quietly proudly, like a silent prayer.

The commanding desk was tall and lonely, a seat she took fondly, a chair that breathed the cosmic dust, the beats in rhythm to the entire ship, like the steps from below. The

commanders begin their entrance. Anturro, a tall flabbergasted man who says nothing but has too much to say. Neemad, a blind man that lived past names. Kiss, a sadistic clairvoyant that puts all her force in steps. And Balden, as old as Olmilla, and as wise as the stars. A hurried crew meanders after them.

They congregate together on the veranda beneath Ave's feet. They find their same seats, and their jabber stops.

"Anturro, when are you going to stop by? I've been tireless in the mornings, you know...." Kiss trails her fingers across his chin, her impish tail whips in delight, as his brow furrows, and his eyes hurriedly turn away.

"No, Ma'am... I've got work to attend to...." His body slumps once he finally finds his chair, and he shies away from her coy touch. Kiss's broad lips begin to speak as Balden begins the roll call. A quick attendance of those present, check responsibility and positively know the capability available. The crew perks up as their names are called, but a single absence is silent.

Jargon Cowse, a new straggler. A new trainee, under Balden. Someone was taking their time. Ave needed nothing more than loyalty; Jargon Cowse wouldn't last much longer. The meeting must manifest forward as the drifting air grew restless from the absentee's implication. The sentiment would not settle. Balden checked once more, but the time was up. A sigh and his voice planted the task at hand.

"The Stars have spoken. Can you hear them? They are whispering songs of greatness. Tales like the Atlantis cruiser, the Odyssey's destruction, the myths of Ol', and we hear them, loud and clear. Don't we? The very galaxy tires from its boredom. The very skies tremble in anticipation. Hear them? They beseech us. They look out on a resting universe with contempt. We have begun to churn the gears of our enterprise. The Sky Dragoon has begun. Our next

destination is in the Kelper Belt, a simple stint. So simple the money will fill your very bathtub, past the brim, and down your gullet. Can you hear it now? Singing for you? The siren we chase across the cosmos. The Captain has agreed on the path ahead. Kiss's group will take the Sky Dragoon's mother base and hold the position. Anturro's command will be over the main offense with Neemad. The Captain and I will secure the package." A silence hangs as Kiss frowns like wilting grass but brightens before Balden notices. She harbors a passion for destruction, something she had missed out twice on. Something she can't wait on for much longer. Something... that is still murked beneath her flawless fangs.

The news surprised the gathering. The officers had heard nothing of this. They thought the path was straight home to the enclave of the Space Dragoons, Corpse Crater. Yet they still scramble to attention. The few glances they make towards Ave see nothing from the shadows. Old Balden almost peeks upwards. Almost.

Ave is smoking beneath that mindful shade. Burning at the seams. Balden had worked in the family for years. For her lifetime. He had always been genuine and honest and likeminded. Yet now, he spoke against her agreement. The courses they planned through. The debates they had, what happened to them? He had simply decided on his own, without the Captain's consent. He shifted now, awkwardly, clumsily. It was as if he could feel the floor beneath him quake. Yet she remained silent. The Captain can not be weak. Can not falter under pressure. But something must be done, something must always be done.

Chapter 3

Jargon Cowse just got his big break in life. His big chance, to get off these dirty skull-ridden, cave-fleshed, space dragon carcasses. He knew he had the looks, the skills, the style. He only needed the money. He held it inevitable that he was a big shot. He had absolute faith. When he got that call from the Sky Dragoon, he knew it had come. A peculiar task, escort some cargo into space that would be picked up by the Sky Dragoon, and he would get his break as a recruit of the legendary marauding spacecraft. His hair slicked back and in his most acceptable slacks, coupled with his smoothest moves.

But it was odd when the unmarked carrier arrived. Stranger still when the pitch-black masked overseers of this operation asked all too forcefully for him to watch the package from the cargo hold. And most odd, when he thought he saw it move. It rasped the tarp so gently, like a footstep on a beach. A slow, methodical push. It was no longer hanging G's from takeoff or random vectors of space travel. Jargon Cowse knew for sure. It had moved. He tried to knock on the cargo hold door, but he couldn't find its side. The ground rolled beneath him, and gravity disappeared. The tarps loosened and wafted a small silver pill body towards him.

Terror enters Jargon Cowse, his face red with blood, his palms white with sweat. He pushed it away. To knock it back. He did not ask for this. A painful wince as they collided, he could not fathom the prick of blood now hiding beneath his hand.

Jargon Cowse, picked up in open space, the doors slide slowly, his spotless chamber now connecting to a larger supply. A much more significant ecosystem, a far greater environment. The pitch-black masks were unfamiliar, but their hands were warm, like a dream in space.

Chapter 4

Soot. It is like a home, smells good, hides good, and I will be damned if it is not the only thing that stays around. But for now, it looks like I will have to pardon myself from my crime scene. The soot keeps on coming down harder, like clouds touching down on a runway. It is thick and clammy now, a chowder of burnt past times. That damned Old man, he couldn't stand what he created, couldn't look down at the mess he made. He never could. Maybe that's why I am here in this wagon barrel spaceship. In *his* stranded rover, in the smack-damn-spot-on-void full-black hole-survivor trainwreck. It was called the Dead Graft, an empty nebula always storming. Always draping sheets of ash across anything that wondered what it contained. And it had one damn thing. One damn thing that brought me here. The Orgellion Cult, a group of shady money-holders, so thick in the sleeves that no one would think twice once the profit comes around. But that's what made her special. Dammit. You should always check the person you're escorting. Always or it kills you. Or the person on your left.

The Orgellion Cult's station was large. Massive in scale, something that could rival the grandest imperial Inquisitors. Its scale, however, was so tightly wound by the spiraling dark powder that its shape was still unrecognizable from up close. Luckily, Borr knew all too well where the maintenance hangar resided. The careful bobbing continued. Beams of light wandered in circles, aimlessly spotting swirls of smoke. Borr's descent was slow and stagnant. A hesitancy behind his calloused fingers. Something he knew he couldn't keep any longer.

He peered out, searching for a tangible response, but nothing moved. Only the endless swirling of dying work. Ever so much closer, his tiny craft glides. Silent as the airless outside. His eyes darted, looking for the entrance, the printed text of hangar 1-B. The old gate, an entry,

and exit of simpler times. But his eyes must deceive him. The soot has coated all layers thick, like a residing film in an empty coffee cup. His eyes scowl, but a hint of apprehension starts to weasel its way in. The outside layer had always been cleaned. He'd be damned if he hadn't done it himself. Ever closer, the craft eased next to the station. And finally, the hollow opening caved in. It was almost unnoticeable, with a toneless gray and black drenching the embankment walls. An entrance forever hidden, as a lost opening, were it not for the ripping corpse of a maintenance ship crushed against the walls. Borr moved closer, and a skeleton smiled back.

"Poor bastard..."

As he enters the sooted cavernous opening, the fine ash shows its complete encroachment of this lower layer. Completely covering the interior. Borr descends and extends the landing gears. A light jerk as the craft syncs with the space station. Then complete stillness, save for the constant pittering of solid smoke.

Borr reaches back now, his scarred hand fumbling for a smoke. The cockpit was tattered. Had been for quite some time. A lopsided orange high back recliner sat at the controls. They were covered in grime, old molecules of food and smoke. The floor was dirtier, dark from discoloration, like the glass viewer with a hint of brown burnt into it. Borr was tall and muscular, broad in the chest and rough in the face. A straight jawline was it not for the alcohol that ran his system. A wrangled beard that fell beneath his neck complimented the rampant purple beneath his eyes. One with a long scar that happened to miss his sight. The thirsty migraine comes on again, like a roaring canon. It stares Borr down, the fuse whittling away.

Borr stumbles forward, reaching for another drink, something to wet the ignition. But everything's already empty, the cans of beer littered at his feet, the kegs of alcohol, weeping drops of that precious gold. Nothing but the fine wine in the cabinet. A little ways from the

cockpit. An oddly exquisite, ornamental cabinet sits waiting, hinges rusting in closed defiance. Borr's eyes are spinning, his legs are weak, his voice is cursing, but the cannon fires, again and again. It is ringing. Like the belt across his back, like the smoking gun in his hand, like the money in his pocket, like the phone by the bed, like the girl before... It's quiet now. The clean crystal glass, polished to a shine, scrawled with an exquisite hand, "*To Us! Cheers.*" while the rest was punished by immolation. The same fire that charred the bottle's bottom. The only dirty thing left behind, as Borr walks forward. It's time to go.

Borr slides into the tight loving grasp of the spacesuit. Its insides are like a snake's coils, twisting with glee as he slides in. His hands reach the end, where the old gloves are waiting. The Mechanical Mech Personnel constricts the helmet shutters above. Darkness, complete and silent, as the droll of logic, works to life. With three beeps, vision is restored. A projection of the outside world laid out within the skull of a durable spacewalker. The pinch of needles, as they connect to his nerves. The decorated past, only a symbol on the corpse.

"Open the exit." His voice hums with power. The sound only to him as space opens wide. The rush of air behind him and the endless soot beneath him. The suit steps forward, connecting with the ground. Again, and again. Its weight is silent before the darkness. As Borr approaches, the old letters 1-B reflect his mechanical light. They rest directly above an entrance. One that takes you right to the lift. A place to reach the deepest bowels of the space station. To resolve the crimes he has committed against himself, the world, and her.

It is always her, huh. She never did like to be left out.

"I will fix this, then I'll go straight to you. I swear. I won't lie this time." His voice is melancholic, resounding in the tight airlocked chamber that's mobility he relies on. He advances slowly, like wading through a river, completely submerged. The entrance to the elevator is bare

of life, but not soot. *It's like a damn infestation.* Everywhere his vision picks up. A hall of gray. He pushes forward, down the long empty hallway. Reaching out with every step, his handprint straining the wall. Yet as he trails dreamlessly along, everything opens up. A massive industrial complex spreads wide. A chamber falls endlessly down and reaches with giant arms to an undisclosed ceiling. Borr pauses as the information registers before kicking off. The entire station's gravity seems to be missing. The spacesuit dives forward. Rising, it floats through a murky water-like sky. Doors and entrances litter the walls, bridges, and paths cross the chasm, and a long central chute that held the elevator disappeared beneath him. Wide and alone, the walls give out, too distant to be seen. Borr floats higher, searching for the command center at the top.

NOTE: More available upon request.