**The Last Taco Bell on Earth**

Susan’s roller bag created a series of clicking and popping sounds as she dragged it across the old airport floor. Nothing had been updated in decades, spaceports being the transportation industries main concern now.

She shuddered as she passed the dark spaces where previously there had been so much life. Stores used to sell luxury items like headphones and jewelry or last-minute trinkets like shot glasses and sweatshirts splashed with New York or Dallas or San Diego on the front. Now, there was just darkness.

Susan found gate C-9 with ease. She stood next to the stream of people deplaning. Among the bright clothes of the travelers walked two men dressed in somber black. Susan hesitantly lifted her hand to attract their attention, unsure if it was them.

“You must be Susan.” The older man offered his hand as he approached. “I’m Mark.”

“Dylan,” The second man also offered a handshake. “Are we in time?”

Susan looked at her watch. “Cutting it close. Shall we?” Susan gestured to the right, back the way she had just come. The restaurant was at gate C41.

As they walked along, there was some minimal talk between Dylan and Mark, who had met on the plane. But Susan was reminiscing about when her prom date agreed to buy her all the ninety-nine-cent tacos she wanted. She felt Dylan touch her on the arm.

“Hey, are you okay?” He asked.

Susan contemplated a moment before answering truthfully. “I’m going to be okay. I don’t know. It all seems so final. You know? Like the time you come back after college and your parents have transformed your room into a craft room or whatever.”

 “I wouldn’t know. I still live with my parents,” said Dylan.

“Oh.” Susan looked away. Dylan fell back a step behind her.

She stopped and grabbed his arm. “I’m just saying, it’s truly the end of an era. Yeah, it still exists out *there,* but this is something else, something bigger than ourselves. It should be unsettling.”

Dylan and Mark both nodded.

After a few minutes of silent trudging, they were finally standing in front of the purple, pink and white lit sign.

Susan checked her watch again—ten minutes to closing time.

“Do you know what you want?” Susan gestured for either Mark or Dylan to order first.

Dylan eagerly stepped up to the counter. “Two crunch wrap supremes, two cheesy gordita crunches”—Dylan turned back to Susan and Mark—“the only crunches I do,” he said and laughed, then turned back to give the rest of his order.

Susan tuned out, thinking of how everything had changed so much in the past ten years after they had moved farming off-world. Once they could sustain cattle-raising in space, they started moving the people up there. Everything had slowly shut down, and now, it was the end for this, too.

“Susan?” Mark’s voice brought her out of her thoughts. “Would you like to go next?”

Susan hummed her consent and walked up to the counter where Dylan was still standing, putting a large tip in the jar.

“For you guys,” he said. “Thanks for holding out till now.”

“Uh, thanks for the tip,” was all the cashier said, utterly unimpressed with the historical moment.

Dylan shook his head and stepped aside for Susan.

“Three soft tacos and a Mexican pizza,” Susan ordered.

“Will that be all?” the bored cashier asked.

“Ooo, and a drink, please,” Susan added on second thought.

She paid, gathered her drink, and turned to see Dylan sitting at one of only a couple tables stashed in front of the restaurant.

It wasn’t a very dignified end, she had to admit. And she was sad more people in the fan club chatroom hadn’t wanted to come say goodbye.

Dylan was getting up for his order as she sat down. When he returned, he was carrying two trays, one piled high with his order and one with Susan’s food. Mark joined them a couple minutes later with his own tray.

Each of them sat in silence, staring at their feast wrapped in the bright white and colored wrappers. Susan was glad they hadn’t updated them to the new silver wrappers advertised for their space locations.

“Should we say something?” Mark asked.

“Like a prayer?” joked Dylan.

“I was thinking more like we share what we’re thankful for or why we love this place so much.”

“You start,” Susan said, afraid she would chortle up if she spoke first.

“Okay.” Mark cleared his throat. “When I was a teenager, my dad lost his job, and my parents needed help paying for things, so I got a job at Taco Bell. It wasn’t much, but I was a hard worker and learned and moved up quickly. Ended up loving the job so much that I stayed for 50 years until they shut down our location last year.” He looked down at his tray.

“This must be painful for you,” Susan said, touching his shoulder lightly.

“For all of us,” Mark replied.

“What about you, Susan?” Dylan asked.

“Taco Bell is the last connection I have to my mom. My parents hated each other after their divorce. My mom didn’t want my dad knowing where she lived, so every time I was supposed to see him, we drove to this Taco Bell in my town and ate while we waited for him to pick me up.” Susan paused to wipe away an error tear with her napkin. She smiled, “It’s silly, but I took some of my mom’s ashes, just a handful, and spread them in that Taco Bell parking lot.”

“That’s not silly,” Mark reassured her.

“Thanks.” Susan smiled again.

“How about you?” Both Mark and Susan turned toward Dylan.

“I just really like the food, man.” Dylan shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t have some deep sentimental story for you. I’m just sad this will be my last chance to eat it.”

“Well,” Susan started, “at least it’s still up there. At the rate the planet is emptying, you might end up leaving soon too.”

Dylan shook his head. “Nah, my parents both have COPD. So the lower rate of oxygen in the space stations wouldn’t support their needs. I’m their only caretaker, which means I’m stuck here. Maybe not forever. But for a long time still.”

Susan nodded in support of his story. “I’m sorry to hear about your parent’s illness. And I’m glad we came together to do this.” She looked from Dylan to Mark.

At that moment, the Taco Bell sign above them went dark, and the cashier came around the front to permanently pull the cage down.

The three people sitting in front of the restaurant glanced at each other in silence. Then they each picked up an item from their tray and unwrapped the last Taco Bell to ever be eaten on earth.