

"People with developmental disabilities are only handicapped by how much we underestimate them." — **D. Kirk**

Eric Lungrun stood near the top of the world in the center of a concrete rocket landing pad. As a cold wind blew through the tangles of his curly blonde hair, he inhaled deeply, and his chest swelled with pride. Never mind that his task for today was to sweep bits of gravel and leaves from the pad; he was, in fact, on the Estring Space Center team, the pride of the European Union.

Just three years ago, like many other locals, he'd labored at the iron mines in his hometown of Kiruna, Swedish Lapland, two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle. He was devastated when stripped of its copper, they closed the mines. That turned out to be a blessing. He worked hard on the Space Center's janitorial staff and attended Estring's evening classes. Tomorrow, he'll graduate and start his new job.

At the end of the day, he zipped up his fur-lined jacket, wishing he had something a little less bulky, and headed for the bus stop. It was late November, and ever since he was a kid, there'd be a foot or two of snow piled at the curbs by now. But this year, the only snow he saw was a steady drizzle of fine wet granules that melted as they hit the ground. A dozen other passengers collected in the glass-enclosed pick-up station, mostly engineers and communications techs. No one spoke to Eric, yet he didn't mind. He'd be one of them one day—then they'd all have long discussions.

Fifteen minutes later, he was in his mom's room at the senior center, holding her hand. He rolled her wheelchair to the window overlooking the abandoned strip mines. She looked up at Eric and squeezed his hand, managing a crooked smile—a vestige of her stroke. He squeezed back. "At the end of the week, the X-9 Mars probe will land at our site. Since I've had the course, I've been assigned to the washdown team." Her eyes twinkled as she rubbed her flannel bathrobe sleeve against his hand.

He searched his pockets twice before producing a graduation announcement and read it aloud. He sighed wistfully and added, "Whenever I had trouble in school, you kept me going." He lifted her hand and kissed it. "Thanks for that."

He wiped a tear from her cheek and continued, "Ursula says 'Hi.' Tomorrow, we're having dinner at her hotel restaurant to celebrate. Her boss is treating us as a graduation gift. He says she's the best chambermaid at the hotel." They sat and gazed at each other silently for a few more minutes. He kissed his mom on the forehead and left to visit his other love.

The Hotel B-10, where his girlfriend, Ursula, worked, was only a fifteen-minute walk. The streets were nearly empty and eerily quiet. This strange, barely freezing snowfall had been continuous for the past two weeks. Tonight, it seemed to hang in mid-air. In the silence, he imagined hearing footsteps behind him, but no one was there whenever he turned. He shook his head. Since the mines closed, the quiet of Kiruna had often crept him out.

As he approached the parking lot, the lines of halogen lamp posts automatically switched on. The cedar-shingled, two-story A-frame was not very fancy, but the B-10 was the best hotel in town. At this time of year, the hotel was mostly vacant. Yet by January, it would be jammed with

adventurous guests coming for northern lights tours, the famed Ice Hotel, and the village of the indigenous Sami People in nearby Jukkasjarvi.

Ursala was laughing with the front desk clerk when Eric entered the lobby. She turned and met him with a long hug. "How's my Class.... What are you again?"

He grinned. "Class Three Sanitation Technician." A blush spread from his collar and engulfed his face.

She was still in her uniform and, as usual, make-up-free, yet her hair shimmered, and her laugh melted his heart. Eric walked her home in the dark, and they kissed goodnight, then he jogged two blocks to his house. The velvet silence of the night no longer scared him. He hummed an unnamed tune his father used to sing to him all the way home. Tonight, he was the luckiest guy in the world.

He entered the modest eighty-year-old home where he grew up. Its cedar exterior was well-weathered, but inside was a treasure of well-preserved memories. In his antiquated kitchen, Eric made a cup of coffee, pan-boiled like his mom used to do it, and ate a bowl of oatmeal. He winced as those painful memories of grade school returned. The taunts. They called him stupid, even in front of Ursala. Of course, they teased her much worse because of her Down syndrome.

He snapped out of it and gave himself one of those good talking-tos. He had this great new job and would do whatever was needed for success at the Space Center. And in his heart, he knew Ursala was his perfect match. He'd known her since kindergarten; someday, they'd get married and show them all.

In the morning, Eric put on his best work clothes and left the house early for his new job. He knew the way to his boss' office. He'd cleaned it many times. The door was open, and the short, stocky man in khaki pants and a blue dress shirt, sporting a warm smile, waved him in. "Hello, Eric." He extended a hand that Eric nervously shook. "I'm Will Albart. Welcome aboard. I'll get us some coffee while we wait for the other two."

He scanned the office when his boss left the room. It was small but meticulously tidy. The certificate on the wall was from Uppsala University. The guy had a Ph.D. in materials engineering. *Whatever that was.* The computer's screensaver displayed Estringe's latest spacecraft. Eric daydreamed of having an office like this, and he'd just taken the next step.

Soon, his two workmates, Sven and Trad, joined them, and Dr. Albart introduced them. Eric filled with a warm glow. For the first time in his life, he felt like a professional.

The boss pointed to his monitor. "Gentlemen, our X-9 Mars probe will land here in three days. We expected to have our automated washdown system ready but had some last-minute problems. So, we'll have to go back to our old procedure."

They were given their bio-hazard suits and watched training videos. The following day, they practiced the washdown procedure. The task seemed simple enough—spray down every

centimeter of the craft three times and chase the rinses down the center drain. Then, the analytical collection team would take it from there before unloading the Martian surface samples.

He hardly slept the next two nights, imagining the excitement of the landing and the TV cameras that would be there at touchdown. Maybe they'd film his team as they emerged on the platform—something to show his grandkids. Ursala and her friends would be watching from one of the hotel rooms. It might even be on TV at the nursing home.

It was almost touchdown time, and things happened quickly. Everyone on the team double-checked each other's bio-hazard suit closures while they waited in front of their bunker's viewing port. The TV trucks were in place, and the sun hid behind the clouds. A pinpoint of light flashed in the western sky, expanding to a blinding glare slowly approaching the area. A buzzer sounded in their bunker, signaling five minutes to touchdown. They fastened their helmets and lined up at the door. After the perfect vertical landing, Eric expected to see a bright silver rocket on the pad, but most of it had a bluish tint, with a few scattered black char spots.

The buzzer sounded again, the bunker door opened, and Eric's team was on. As rehearsed, they pulled the stainless-steel-clad hose up the steps to the pad. Eric was second in line. He stopped for a second to catch his breath as he realized the significance of this moment. He was standing under something that had just been to Mars.

During the washdown, the wind gusted, the dreary clouds persisted, and it was colder than usual at minus two degrees Celsius. Yet sweat ran down Eric's right arm. They sprayed off each other's suits before going back to the bunker. He couldn't wait to get into the shower. That sweaty arm was itching.

As he undressed, Eric saw the slightest gap in the seal of his right glove. *Maybe Sven messed up when he checked my sleeve clasp.* He shivered with doubt and fear. That might not have been sweat he felt on his arm. Something like this could ruin his career, maybe his whole life. He decided to keep quiet, at least for now, and thoroughly soap up in the shower.

The next team had taken over, removing instruments and taking close-up photos of the rocket's skin. Eric's crew was allowed to leave. He pushed his worries aside and took the bus to the hotel to meet Ursala for that special reindeer steak dinner. It was her favorite.

They met in the lobby. The day's excitement caught up to him, and he was starved. Andre, the hotel manager, and the receptionist walked them to a window table. Only one other couple was dining, and they joined the staff in applauding the new local celebrity, Class Three Tech Eric Lungren. All of the big shots were celebrating at the Space Center. This party was just for them.

Throughout a delicious dinner, his crystal glass was always full of Akavit, *the water of life*. None for Ursala, though. Eric quickly cleared his plate, and a surprised waiter brought seconds. The meal ended with a magnificent dessert of cloudberry and cream.

On the walk home, tiny air-borne ice kernels looked like parade confetti under the streetlights. A great end to a great day.

Once they were at his house, he couldn't undress fast enough. As Eric kicked off his shorts, Ursala lay on the bed naked, her arms outstretched. They had tried to postpone sex until their wedding, but who knew if or when that would happen. So, they kept it to special occasions and never told her parents. Usually, at this stage, he'd be holding back his climax, but tonight, his little buddy was out cold. *Too much booze.*

This had happened only once before for the same reason, and he was so embarrassed because he had forgotten. But his Ursala said she understood now, as she did then. She sat up, smiled, and kissed his arm. "What are all those dark blue veins? Do they hurt? No wonder Wild Willy's asleep."

"No, they just kind of tingle." He looked down at his legs. A similar pattern was blooming on his thighs. He burped up a sour version of cloudberry, realizing he'd have to report this to his boss in the morning.

On the walk back to Ursala's house, they discussed their favorite subject, wedding plans. Although he'd eaten an enormous meal, his stomach growled as he returned home.

At his doorstep lay Orange, the neighborhood stray cat that sometimes visited. Eric stooped down, scratched behind the tabby's ears, and she purred. He brought her in, poured her a saucer of milk, and got ready for bed. Instead of returning to the door, Orange disappeared from sight. That was unlike her, but he craved the feline's company tonight.

At four in the morning, his stomach was still growling. His feet felt heavy as he went to the kitchen and ate a sandwich. He stopped at the bathroom on his way back to bed. His reflection was shocking. He was much thinner, and his whole body was laced with bright blue veins. He rubbed his eyes and gasped. His pupils had elongated to vertical slits. His strength was draining, and he shuffled to his bedroom window in time to see the sky erupt with misty blue and green northern lights. The windowpane was in the way. He threw on some clothes and stood on his front lawn. As he soaked in the mystical aurora, his strength returned. The heavenly plasma reinvigorated him like food no longer could.

Then he ran to the Space Center.

Ursala woke from a sound sleep when her mind took another one of those detours. This one was different. She heard Eric's voice echoing in her head.

"Please, know that I love you. Always will. Our hearts are one, so I know you can hear me. I've been chosen to deliver an important message. I'm changing fast and need to get to work while I still can. Remember, I'll always be with you if I don't see you again. Please look after my mother and take care of Orange."

She cried herself back to sleep, picturing how proudly he smiled during dinner.

The guard at the Space Center lobby awoke from his nap to a banging at the entrance doors. In the dim light, a somewhat familiar figure pulled an employee badge from his coat pocket and held it to the glass. The door buzzed open, and when the guard got a closer look, he backed away, nearly falling over his desk. The visitor growled, "Get me Dr. Albart."

The guard grabbed his phone and directory, ran into an office, locked the door, and furiously dialed the phone. As Eric paced the lobby, cars filled the parking lot as if it was four hours later.

Soon, a team of hazmat-suited doctors rushed Eric to an operating theater. Behind the glass partition sat more scientists and doctors. A robotic system approached and measured his vital signs as Eric motioned toward the microphone suspended above him. The theater speakers clicked on. Without moving a muscle, he spoke in a gravelly version of his former voice. "Your space probe returned to Earth with an urgent message, and I'm the messenger. I have little time left, so please listen carefully." Every observer was transfixed on the non-threatening visitor who had commandeered Eric.

"We ruined Mars eons ago and don't want you to make the same mistakes. You've seen the early signs of climate change, but everything is about to cascade. Three years from now, Earth, as you know it, could end." Everyone murmured and squirmed in their seats. "Here's what is needed."

In the corner of the gallery, a printer spewed a twenty-page document. The gruff voice continued, "This method produces an ultra-light, nano-porous, activated silica powder of tremendous surface area. It can trap up to ten thousand times its weight in gaseous carbon compounds. Seed the atmosphere with it. When the particles are saturated with pollutants, they'll cluster, and it will gently rain fertile sand to enrich the soil for faster crop growth and renewed forests. Once it's depleted of organics, the powder can be re-activated and recycled."

As if a fireworks fuse had burned down, an explosion of blue and yellow sparks filled the operating room. When the last spark died and the smoke had cleared, only a pile of grey ash occupied the gurney.

Six months later, Albart and Professor Sorrenson, his doctorate advisor at the University of Uppsala, stood at the edge of a nearby farm, looking up as crop dusters broadcast a fine white powder a mile above their heads. Within fifteen minutes, grey-brown sand drizzled down.

Albart was on the phone with the Space Center's imaging satellite team. He clapped loudly. "Our infrared spectroscopy verified a drastic reduction of atmospheric carbon compounds. We're on."

Later that year, Eric's gift to the world won a Nobel Prize.

One night, during one of her regular visits, Ursala stared out the nursing home window as she brushed Eric's mom's hair. "I'll bet he's out there somewhere. Dr. Albart said the air's getting cleaner because of Eric. I miss him badly, but I'm so proud."

The old lady smiled and petted Orange, who sat quietly on her lap. The tabby, now the nursing home's mascot, brought comfort to all of the patients, but she favored this room.

The cat jumped to the floor as a spectacular indigo blaze lit the window and filled the room. Thinking of Eric, Ursala crouched to give Eric's mom a hug. Like magic, she touched Ursala's arm, smiled her crooked smile, and spoke for the first time in three years.

"It's him."