

Outside, the blast-furnace heat and foul odor greeted her like a slap in the face; a first, shallow breath almost panicking her. There was no time to waste. Running the three hundred meters over loose and uneven footing would take forty-five, maybe fifty seconds. Doing so would be a huge mistake, dramatically increasing her body's demand for oxygen. Maintaining control of respiratory and heart rates, the only real chance she had of accomplishing this insanity, would become impossible.

Fighting the unbearable urge to sprint, she began jogging at a slow, steady pace. Already she could feel the effects of breathing in the thin Murkorian air, each hollow breath sending a spasm of pain shooting into her chest. Her legs, too, were beginning to ache, feeling heavy even in the low-g. Traveling beyond the pain, there was an undeniable fascination to being out and about on an alien world. Unencumbered by the clever artifices of humanity, the contact was more intimate, more visceral: The glorious blue webbing of a magnetic storm coursing through a dirt-brown cloud; a crimson sun winking in and out of view as it fought to break through the shimmering haze; the sting of windblown particles on her exposed skin.

In the mid-distance, fumaroles lined up like sentinels, watching her progress.

*Krezakgrfel! Merfalger! Levishnuplef!*

She had not realized that they could be so expressive!

And there, further out, a roller kicking up a tumbling spiral of glistening lava shards!

Losing focus—running too fast.

To prevent her mind from wandering she tried to refocus her attention closer in, to the rhythmic *crunch crunch crunch* of footfalls on granulated pumice.

A cadence to mesmerize a mind starved of oxygen.

*Crunch Crunch Crunch, Crunch Crunch Crunch, Crunch Crunch Crunch.*

The muted conversation of an almost dead planet—and, almost indiscernible through the pain, the vague sensation of being watched, experienced by Jensen and others.