One More Hill — Quincy A. Rock

Verenda knew it was going to be a rough day as soon as the exterior airlock door slid open and a gust of frigid air blasted across their faces. If she hadn't already been hot from their group warmup in the rec room, her muscles might've frozen on the spot. Behind her, she heard Jules curse in a low voice and the sound of a zipper being drawn ever so slightly tighter.

"V, tell him we're not ready for this yet," Claira muttered. Her words were almost whisked away by the biting wind, and Verenda had to struggle to catch them.

V shot a glance over her shoulder, not quite able to hide her surprise. "Why do you think he'd listen to me? And we are ready for this," she added, almost as an afterthought.

"You're his favorite," Claira replied, not meeting V's eyes. "And Jess might be ready, but Jules sure isn't."

"Cut the chatter," Master Sergeant Dawson ordered as he turned to face the four cadets. He wasn't as big or as loud as V would've imagined a marine to be, but his quiet intensity and scrutiny had a way of getting under V's skin in a way she imagined bluster wouldn't. "Form up on the line to receive your instruction for today's exercise."

They piled out of the 'lock onto the surface of Icaput, squinting in the bright sunlight that somehow provided no warmth against the wind's chill. The current progress of Icaput's terraforming had yielded an atmosphere of a suitable pressure, but free oxygen was still very thin. Not one to let a harsh environment go to waste, Dawson preferred training on the planet's surface rather than in the climate-controlled rec room.

The cadets took in the familiar view of forbidding, stony hills spackled with hardy green vegetation as they trudged along. The gravel of a faint pathway, formed by their many excursions onto the surface from their subterranean colony, crunched under their boots.

They stood at ragged attention on the latest line carved into the ground by Dawson. Icaput's winds erased the rut every few days, and this one was already beginning to fade into nonexistence. It reminded V of the legends of Old Earth, that brief blip of order and purpose before hubris scoured all life from the planet.

"Your exercise today is simple," Dawson said, pulling V from her reverie. "Fifteen kilometers on the loop that's been marked with the yellow flags. Be back here on the line in an hour fifteen or less, and you pass."

"And if we aren't, sir?" V asked, keeping her gaze straight ahead on the line of hills in the distance. The slight burn of bile soured her throat at the thought of failure, but a good tactician needed to be prepared for any outcome. She had to pass, to be that one stride closer to graduation and the green-and-silver stripes of a Junior Ship Officer.

Dawson took one step closer to V, and she had to fight the urge to take a corresponding step back. "If you don't pass, then you don't get SETI certified, Cadet Sollers," he replied, his voice level and even. "And you have to take the entire Stamina and Endurance Training Integration curriculum again while your successful peers here move on without you. No SETI, no stripes. Clear?"

V's mind flashed to the agonizing workouts and training runs in the low-oxygen atmosphere of Icaput they'd already endured, choking and wheezing to adapt to air that was never enough for their straining muscles. She shivered despite herself, unsure if it was just from the cold or from dread.

"We're training to be officers, not marines," Jules complained.

Dawson's attention snapped to Jules. "If you don't have what it takes to endure physical hardship, if you're not inured to pain and stress, then you're not going to cut it as a C-tech, let alone a fleet commander. You have to make life-or-death calls when you're in command, no matter your condition. The body sharpens the mind, Harada. Now"—he pointed to the first yellow flag at the summit of a low hill—"show me how sharp you all are. Move!"

And just like that, they were off.

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It was around the ninth kilometer that V started to wonder if Claira had been right. Jess had bounded off at her own pace and dwindled to a black speck on the path ahead. Only the curvature of the hills could obscure her from view: Icaput hosted no trees. Instead of more complex plant life, sparse coatings of mosses and particularly rugged ferns supported the ongoing terraforming effort. V could take pride in her people's ability to reshape worlds for human needs rather than searching for ready-made Edens, but the exhaustion of running in the thin atmosphere sapped her of any pride she might have felt.

Claira had stayed with V for the first five kilometers, then slowly fell farther and farther behind as V pressed her pace. Jules was somewhere behind Claira, but V hadn't seen her since the start of the grueling exercise.

V's vision narrowed onto the next yellow flag as she struggled up yet another scraggly slope. Her breath came in short, sharp gasps that lit her chest aflame with stabbing pain. Her wristpad helpfully informed her that her blood oxygen level was less than ideal (as if she didn't already know that), but she couldn't quit now. She couldn't fail.

Her calves burned with a dull ache as she crested the hill, and she spotted the next yellow flag in a small valley by a crumpled form. V made it a few strides down the slope before her addled brain recognized that the crumpled form was Jess, and her heart lurched.

She staggered over to the unmoving Jess, checking her time as she went: 43:08, it blinked. It wouldn't be too much of a loss to see if Jess was okay. She had to be okay. She had to.

"Jess, what's wrong?" V tried to say, but no words emerged from her harsh, heaving breaths. Jess was panting just as heavily as her, lying facedown on a patch of thick moss with her right arm pinned under her shaking torso. V slapped a sluggish hand on Jess's shoulder, and Jess flinched.

Problem? V signed at her, then saw tears running down Jess's face. Jess looked away.

I think ankle sprained, Jess signed back. *Turned on rock.*

"I don't … think Dawson … will dock you … for that," V said, trying her best to force out the words between gasps. "Extenuating … circumstances." Jess still wasn't looking at her.

Maybe. Jess was the most eloquent with vacuum signaling: V could see the doubt in her movements, even as her other hand scrubbed at her eyes. Fallen droplets of tears made the moss gleam in the weak sunlight.

"I need … to keep … going," V said. She'd wasted enough time as it was, and Jess wasn't in any life-threatening danger.

NO, Jess signed, the motion emphatic. *You will hurt yourself.*

"What?"

What's your blood oxygen? Jess drew in a shuddering breath, then sat up with a wince.

V checked her wristpad again. "91," she replied. The pale blue sky seemed a lot brighter than usual, and even though she wasn't moving, the hilltops surrounding the small valley seemed to be swaying.

"V, 95 percent is low normal. Do you not pay attention in lecture?" Jess pushed off of the ground and stood on one leg, clasping V's shoulders as much to focus her as to stay upright.

A pang of envy cut through V at Jess's seeming immunity to the thin air. Shame and frustration mingled together to spark a new fire in her chest, and she swatted at Jess's arms without thinking. "I'm fine; you're the one … with the sprain."

A glimmer of hurt flashed across Jess's face, quickly masked by concern. She clung tighter to V's shoulders, enough to be painful. "Walk me back. Neither of us can run."

"Fine," V conceded. "Just until … I catch my breath."

They didn't even make it two hundred meters on the rough ground of the valley before Claira caught up to them.

"What happened?" Claira asked, slowing to walk alongside them. V felt a stab of envy again, this time at Claira's nonchalance. Though the other cadet was coated in a sheen of sweat and her nostrils flared each time she inhaled, she could easily speak. Claira's pace was what V should've been running, instead of stupidly pushing herself to the brink before Jess intervened. She'd been too focused on beating the time, passing SETI, and earning her stripes to realize what she was doing to herself. V bit her lip to stop her eyes from welling with embarrassment, with limited success.

"I think I sprained my ankle," Jess said. "V's helping me back." V noticed Jess didn't mention V's recklessness, and Jess gave her a slow wink as if she knew what V was thinking. A warm glow settled in V's stomach, and she returned Jess's wink with a tired smile.

"Looks like I'll actually beat you guys for once," Claira said to them, grinning, and started up into a trot. "Wish me luck."

"Where do you think you're going, Claira?" Jess snapped.

Claira froze.

"You should walk back with us," Jess said, her tone quiet but forceful. "If one of us fails, we should all fail. We're in this together."

"But—" Claira protested.

"We'll all get SETI certified," Jess continued over her. "We'll all earn our stripes. But not like that."

Claira slipped her jacket off of her waist and shrugged into it, but didn't turn around to look at either of them. "I shouldn't take the fall for something you screwed up," she replied, bitterness lacing her words.

With her arm around Jess's shoulders, V felt rather than heard Jess's pained intake of breath. "We're on the same team, Claira," V said, squeezing Jess's shoulder. "Think of what you're telling Dawson if you do this. Would you abandon your people for your own gain? How much more would you be willing to sacrifice the lives of those under your command without a second thought? Hasn't that happened enough already?"

Claira crossed her arms, and V had no way of gauging her mood from her rigid back. "This is my chance to shine. I've trained so hard for this, and you're asking me to throw it all away?"

"No," Jess spoke up. "I'm asking—*we're* asking—you set it aside for a moment to stay with us. There's no one else but us—do you really want to go it alone?"

There was a strained pause broken by no sound except the steady hissing and howling of the wind. "Okay," Claira said after a moment, the tension bleeding out of her posture as she hung her head. "I'll stay. For you."

"Thank you," Jess replied with genuine warmth in her voice.

"It'd be pretty boring without you guys," Claira added with an understated shrug. She turned and offered a slight smile to V and Jess.

After several more minutes of trudging over wind-scoured hills freckled with tenacious moss, V heard the telltale crunching of footsteps on the trail behind them.

Jules swore as she came to a halt beside them, her hands grasping her knees as she struggled to breathe. "What'd I miss?" she gasped.

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They all failed, coming in well over the time Dawson had set. They were sweaty, shivering, and aching all over, but they stood tall and at attention before him. To V's surprise, the sour feeling of failure didn't curdle in her gut as Dawson noted their final time. In fact, just as he turned away to lead them back through the airlock, V could've sworn she saw the faintest ghost of a smile touch the corners of his mouth.