

“Entering close orbit of the planet now, ma’am.”

“Excellent. Make sure the drop locations are plotted and confirmed,” Captain Jorvanis ordered before opening the ship’s internal comms, “Attention all scout teams: assemble for final briefing.”

She strode from the flight deck, taking the elevator down two levels to where the briefing room was located, the scouts already starting to filter in. She followed behind a krogan, indicated for those who had already arrived to sit in the chairs dotted around the edge of the room, while she took centre-stage.

Once the last of the stragglers had taken their seats, she addressed them, “This is a highly significant day on a very important mission: if everyone here does their job and it’s confirmed that this planet is, indeed, fit for habitation, we will be the trailblazers in the establishment of the very first truly multi-racial colony. Up until now, each of our species has gone it alone in terms of colonising new worlds, rarely allowing others to join with us in our settlements. Here, however, we intend to build a society in which turians, salarians, krogans, asari, humans, elcor, and any other people who may join us will have an equal voice in its development and governance. It will be the Citadel but more, the blueprint for the future of the galaxy.

“You will all doubtlessly face some form of danger on this planet, which we, for now, call XK-72. You have all been trained to handle hazards of every kind, so I expect you all to take them in your stride and provide us with reports that balance the good and the bad, and which evaluate every region’s suitability for habitation.

“We have already ascertained that the days on XK-72 are slightly shorter than those on Earth, and it is this timing standard which we will be using. Each team will be dropped in a different location on the planet’s surface, and each team will have eight days in which to survey their respective regions, catalogue dangers and prime spots for habitation, then make their way to the nearest rendezvous point for pickup. If any team is to encounter insurmountable peril or suffer injuries beyond the assistance of medi-gel, the ship’s comms will be open for mayday calls.

“I would like you all now to fetch your provisions and equipment, ready for the drop. Team Alpha will be go in ten minutes. Dismissed.”

“All set?” Derek asked, tossing a backpack into their designated drop-pod.

Andros grinned as best a turian could. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

He took the good-natured shove from his human counterpart as he climbed into the pod with his own supplies and settled back in the uncomfortable, but thankfully temporary seat. Derek sat opposite, raising a hand to press the button that would signal their readiness.

The pair, despite their earlier shows of jovial camaraderie, lapsed into nervous silence as they waited. One by one, they heard other teams being given a warning a few seconds before their pods were released.

Then, the flanging tones of the captain addressed them personally: “Team Delta, prepare for drop.”

The two hatches connecting their pod to the ship hissed shut, sealing them in darkness but for the dim glow of the few displays lining the wall beneath the window, through which they could see the star-dotted blackness of space above, the hazy horizon of XK-72 below.

"Here we go," Derek muttered, double checking his harness.

The clamps holding their pod in place withdrew, and then the ship above seemed to be flying away from them, retreating from the planet hurtling up towards it. The atmosphere appeared to brighten as they approached it, dimming the darkness and the shimmering stars suspended in the vast nothingness.

"It occurred to me that a turian was an odd choice to lead the exploration of a potential multi-racial colony," Andros commented as casually as he could, as if there weren't red flashes shooting past their single window as they plummeted from the vacuum of space into the denser air of the planet, "Might it not have been better to choose someone of a less...divisive race?"

Derek shrugged, pleased for the distraction from the temptation to peer down at the apparent wall of very solid rock and soil growing larger and larger below them. "Pretty sure someone would be upset no matter who they picked. May as well just pick the best person for the job, and Captain Jorvanis is *good*."

"True."

Andros wished had more to say on the subject to avoid contemplation of their mission: it was always better, he found, to be thrust into a situation than to have the opportunity to dwell on it beforehand. But, as he could think of little else at that moment, little else came to mind for conversation topics: "We've got an equatorial region to explore, don't we?"

"Yup," Derek answered; he had given in now and was staring out across the expanding landscape beyond the window, "Mostly savannah, bit of forest, bit of desert."

"Good." Andros had his eyes on the view too, its rate of growth having slowed as the parachute had now unfurled.

Derek managed a laugh, glancing across at his companion. "I doubt the Council would want turians charting the polar regions. 'It's much too cold, totally unliveable! It's not even twenty Celsius here!'"

Andros scoffed in mild indignance, but he couldn't argue with the logic.

When the landing came, the physical bump was only slight, yet the mental jolt for the pod's two passengers was much more intense: the time for action was upon them.

Slinging their bags over their shoulders and drawing their pistols, they leapt from the landing craft – turian, then human – and surveyed the lands they were bidden to explore. The land sloped gently downwards towards the east where a river, many miles across, flowed southward. To the north, the terrain rose sharply to towering mountains that presented an impenetrable blockade; lower peaks continued to their west, roughly following the path of the river, becoming lower and less craggy the further one looked. Stretching south, bordered by these three natural barriers, were golden grasslands dotted with pockets of forest.

"At least we know what's ours to chart," Derek said as he took a few steps up a small rise to get a better view of their immediate surroundings.

Andros nodded, moving around the pod to survey the ground ahead; as there appeared to be nothing more than low grass rippling slightly in the gentlest of breezes around, he had holstered his weapon.

"I say we make for the pocket of trees down by the river," he said, pointing with a gloved hand towards the bluish foliage in the distance, "We should make it before dark. Then from tomorrow we follow zigzag paths that end up in the mountains each night. I'm banking on there being caves."

"Sounds good to me," Derek called back. He made a brief check of the pod, whose instruments had gone dark now that it was grounded, for any overlooked supplies before jogging to catch up to Andros who had already started heading south.

"Seems pretty quiet so far," Andros said casually, striding along at his ease across the ground which undulated down towards their destination.

"Don't say that!" Derek admonished, "Last time you said something like that was when we were in that combat simulator."

"So?"

"So, thirty seconds after that we got ambushed."

Andros laughed, glancing towards the pistol Derek still had drawn. "Humans and your superstitions. Anyway, maybe I *want* something to happen."

Derek rolled his eyes in exasperation, giving his turian companion another shove; Andros returned it with interest.

"Come on, it makes a change from the Citadel at least, right?" Andros continued, "Would you prefer be out exploring uncharted worlds or doing paperwork for C-Sec?"

"You got me there," Derek admitted, finally following his friend's lead and holstering his gun, "And I guess I'd be just as likely to get jumped by a batarian in the Wards. Man, those guys give me the creeps."

"It's the extra eyes, isn't it?"

"What else?" Derek snorted.

They walked on in silence for several minutes, treading across the pliable ground in step with each other, the river and the copse in which they planned to shelter steadily growing larger in their vision.

Then, abruptly, Derek spoke again, "I'm glad I'm on this with you, bud."

"Aww, sweet of you," Andros said with a strong hint of amusement, "But I'm sure you'd say that to anyone with just two eyes."

Derek shook his head, raising a hand to pat the turian's shoulder. "If I've gotta be on some weird uncharted planet facing unknown perils, that could have at least three eyes, I'd want to be with the idiot who got between me and that krogan kid back in grade school."

"Now that *is* sweet," Andros said again, though far more genuinely.

Derek shrugged. "I feel safe with ya, that's all."

The admission earned Derek a one-armed squeeze from his friend. "And I'd sure rather be on the same side as Mister Deadeye here," said Andros, looking down at the one friend who had lasted a lifetime so far, "How many headshots did you get in that sim- woah!"

Instinctively, Andros tugged Derek back, pulling him away from the fissure in the ground which they had stumbled across without the slightest warning.

"Note to self: random portals to infinity," Derek muttered, kneeling down to peer into the dark depths of the gash in the terrain, "I can't see the bottom, not even with my flashlight!"

"At least we can walk around it," Andros said, pointing first back up the slope, away from the river, then towards it, "Can't be more than fifty metres long."

He pulled Derek to his feet and they circled around the chasm. Despite the small detour, they arrived at the edge of the small wood shortly before dusk having met no other obstacles on the way.

"Huh. Water's pink," Derek noted, striding along the line between trees and open grass to the riverbank, "Wanna try some?"

"Not particularly," answered the turian, stepping into the shade; the trees were relatively short and did not have leaves as such, they merely blended smoothly from dark green trunk to thick, curling blue branches.

"Me neither, honestly. Probably better to use our provisions unless it's an emergency."

"Exactly." Andros was moving deeper into the small forest, approaching a plant emitting a faint, pale blue glow. "Check this out."

The moment Derek had caught up and they were within a couple of metres of the plant, a deafening screeching sound erupted from their suits. Immediately pressing their hands over their ears, they backed away, Derek falling to the ground as the noise reverberated around them, sounding much like a bad soundcheck at a concert.

"Turn your electronics off!" bellowed Andros; the sound extinguished itself the second they did so.

"Man, my ears are still ringing," Derek said, shaking his head as if to try to fling the noise out of his head, "Better not go near those things again."

"I think it might be worse than that," Andros said darkly. He trotted back beyond the growth of trees, well clear of the glowing plant. Switching his suit's electronics back on, the piercing screeching began again, though was quickly stifled.

"So our suits are toast?" asked Derek, meeting Andros at the edge of the forest.

"Looks like it," nodded the turian, "No emergency comms for us."

"That's just great," Derek said in loud exasperation, turning and heading back into the dense growth of trees, avoiding the offending plant. He flopped down on the largely bare ground, his back resting against a trunk. "Makes me all the more glad you're here too, though."

The sun had all but set now, the light within the acre or so of forest barely enough to make out the tall figure of the turian from those of the trees around them.

"I'll make a fire," said Andros' voice softly through the gloom, followed by the thud of his backpack hitting the ground, "You find us some rations for tonight. Then we can get some sleep."

After each had enjoyed some nondescript nutri-paste and a cup of recycled water, they unfurled their sleeping bags and settled down for the night. Their shelter of dense foliage remained quiet and undisturbed throughout the hours of darkness, save for the occasional rustle of the breeze passing through the branches.

Derek was jerked back to consciousness the next morning with a loud sneeze, which in turn had Andros sitting up and reaching for his pistol.

"Eugh..." the human muttered, wiping his nose on the back of his glove, "Great start to the day, huh?"

"You're covered in red...stuff," Andros pointed out, drawing his companion's attention to the thin layer of red powder that was scattered all across his face, sleeping bag, and the ground around him.

"So are you," Derek said when he'd looked over at the turian, "What do you think it is? Insects? Fungus?"

"Looks like pollen from this plant," Andros answered as he slid out of his sleeping bag and crossed their tiny clearing to something growing at the foot of one of the trees; the ends of its multiple stems were, indeed, covered even more thickly in the dust than the surrounding area.

Derek got to his feet as well and began brushing the pollen from their belongings. "We should probably move on before any more of the plant life decides to screw us over somehow."

They departed their arboreal shelter as quickly as they could and resumed their southward journey, hiking back up the sloping terrain, away from the river. Eventually they met a ridge that ran parallel to both the mountains looming in the background and the snaking course of the river behind them; as it gave them a view of the high and lowlands and limited the need to climb, they agreed to follow its course for the remainder of the day.

The expanse of dry grassland was seldom interrupted by anything but the shallow dips in the gently undulating terrain; the few clumps of trees they encountered on their day's travels were invariably located where tiny underground brooks broke the surface for a few metres before babbling their way back below ground. Andros and Derek steered clear of further investigations of these pockets of woodland: they had enough to report on hazardous plant life already.

As the planet's lonely sun began its steady descent towards the horizon, the two explorers headed for the foot of the mountains as per Andros' suggestion. The incline steepened the closer they got to those high, rocky peaks, though it was hardly arduous for such rigorously trained and conditioned scouts; nevertheless, as dusk settled across the land, Derek found himself lagging behind his lankier companion.

"Hey, wait up!"

"I'll scout ahead," Andros called back; he was amused, Derek could tell.

They walked on for several more minutes, the mountains now obscuring most of the eastward sky, the turian slowly getting smaller and smaller in Derek's view as he put more distance between the two of them. Then, quite without warning, accompanied by a yell of surprise and a thunderous, cascading rumbling, Andros disappeared.

"Shit..." Derek muttered under his breath as he sped up, running as quickly up the slope as his weary legs would allow.

At the point where Andros had vanished the land fell away entirely, abruptly transitioning from a relatively gentle upwards incline to a near perpendicular-walled chasm, like that which they had stumbled across the day before. Clinging to a jutting piece of rock several metres down was a very fearful turian.

"Hang in there, buddy," the human said, hurriedly dropping his back to the ground and extracting an old fashioned length of rope and a peg; once the latter was firmly hammered into the ground with one end of the former tied to it, the middle around his waist, and the other end dangling freely, Derek began to lower himself into the precipice.

"How sturdy's that rock?" he asked as he took cautious steps down the still-crumbling wall of the abyss.

"Good enough," Andros answered, his arms wrapped tightly about its smooth, rounded surface.

Derek gingerly set a foot upon it; when he felt no movement from it, he stepped onto it fully and seized the turian's arms.

"Ready?"

Andros nodded, tentatively releasing his grip on the boulder to cling on to Derek.

"Okay, heave!"

Andros was heavier than Derek remembered, but no amount of extra calories were going to make his childhood friend too weighty to rescue. With a grunt of desperate exertion, he hauled him up onto the top of the rock and tied the loose end of the rope around his pinched middle.

They collapsed onto the sparse, dry grass once they were back on solid ground, well clear of the edge of the new scar in the planet's landscape.

"Thanks, old friend," Andros said shakily after a moment, his eyes closed in relief.

"Don't mention it," Derek replied, untying the rope from himself and the peg, "We'll have to really watch our step, huh?"

The turian looked up when he felt his companion releasing him from the rope as well. Derek smiled, offering Andros a hand. "Cave time?"

Light was slow to reach their cave the following morning: it was south facing, little more than a shallow fissure in the rock that was barely enough to fit the two of them and their supplies.

When the golden glow eventually crept through the narrow opening, it was Derek who awoke first: his head was nearer the entrance as they topped and tailed. Opening his eyes, he was at first dazzled by the beam of sunlight falling across his face; he turned his head away, only to find his nose a scant few inches from Andros' bare feet. Slightly red in the cheek and caught between a rock and a hard place, he sat up and delved into his backpack.

The rustling roused the turian who sat up with a small groan. "Don't tell me it's morning already, I only just lay down," he grumbled, accepting the nutri-paste handed to him which he eyed with an air of disdain, "After this is over, I'm taking time off just to get some proper food."

"I'm game," Derek said as he leaned against the wall of the cave, chowing down on his own, identically uninteresting breakfast, "We could have dinner at that place in the Citadel that does human *and* turian food."

"Panaminos?" Andros chuckled, "The first restaurant to get the bright idea of serving food which both of us can actually eat. Sure, a little celebration won't go amiss after this."

They consumed their allotted morning rations, down a cup of increasingly stale recycled water, then Andros crawled towards the brightening outside world. "You grab our stuff, I'll make sure the coast is clear."

As the turian straightened up, pistol in hand, boots back on, Derek made a brief sweep of their hidey-hole for any discarded items, then shoved their backpacks outside before joining them. It was only when he too was standing and picking up both packs that he noticed that something was a little off: both bags were heavier than he recalled, even seeming large and unwieldy as he hefted his onto his back. His concerns were made all the deeper once he had caught up with Andros who stood at the entrance to the small gully in which they had found their shelter.

"Umm...Andros?"

"All clear. Might have actually seen some wildlife off in the distance, though. About time, wouldn't you say?"

It was only then that the turian looked around, lowering his gaze a fraction when he only caught the top of Derek's head in his peripheral vision. At first he glanced down further, expecting to see the human standing in some kind of depression, but if anything, Derek's feet were elevated an inch or two above his own.

"What the...?" Andros murmured as the two of them stared at one another.

As was standard in human-turian pairings, Andros had always stood around half a head taller than his counterpart, even during their school years. Now, however, Derek fell well short of his shoulder and was standing in armour that hung loosely about his body.

"What happened?" the turian asked concernedly, bending down a little to peer into his friend's face.

"I...I shrank, I guess," Derek answered unhelpfully, bewildered by the turn of events, "Something here must have done something weird to me."

"That pollen stuff, perhaps?" Andros offered.

Derek merely shrugged, his shoulders working somewhat harder to lift his armour and backpack than normal.

"Medi-gel should clear it up," Andros said with feigned confidence.

Derek shook his head dejectedly as the turian raised his arm to perform a well-practised gesture. "Your suit's toast, remember? That means your omni-tool is too."

Andros stared down at him in horror, letting his arm fall to his side again. "And we can't call for assistance either."

Derek shook his head again.

"I guess we continue to the rendezvous site and hope whatever it is can be cured back on the ship," Andros said as he shouldered his pack.

"Not much choice," Derek muttered, "And what if it's permanent?"

The turian started down the slope that would take them back towards open skies and the river beyond. "It won't be," he called back reassuringly, keeping his pace slow, "Anyway, you're not *that* short."

"Too short for service, though, I bet," Derek said, finding that he had to quicken his stride to keep pace with his companion.

Andros paused, waiting until Derek had fallen into step behind him before proceeding. "There are worse things, even if that would be disappointing," he said gently, patting the human's shoulder.

"And if it isn't over? If I shrink more?"

Andros didn't have an answer for that.

Progress was slow that day. They came across several further ravines on their way back towards the river which necessitated detours and again chose to skirt around forested areas for fear of further botanical hazards, yet it was on their return to the mountains in the latter part of the day that their speed was most severely hindered.

Though it made little difference travelling downhill and on the flat, hiking back up the rising terrain had Derek lagging behind Andros far worse than he had done the previous day: a smaller frame meant shorter legs and a comparatively greater burden to bear than the turian's, which in turn saw Derek panting and dragging his feet long before they could begin hunting for a fresh cave in which to spend the night.

Andros had offered to take his friend's backpack for him several times that day already and had been rejected on each occasion; as the sun sank rapidly towards the horizon while they were still some distance from the point where rolling hills turned into craggy rock, however, the time for 'soldiering on' had passed: "Give me your bag, Derek, it's getting dark."

"I can manage," the human gasped, staggering up to meet Andros on the small plateau.

"No, Derek," Andros said firmly, holding out a hand, "Give me your bag. Now. That's an order."

Derek stared up at him in deep surprise: it was perfectly true that Andros did hold a more senior position than he did and was officially the lead on their expedition – the turian had always been the more assertive one of the pair and had the more strategic mind, so Derek hardly begrudged him this – but he had never pulled rank on him before.

The pack was handed over wordlessly.

"Thank you," Andros said, slinging it over one shoulder. His voice was gentler now as he leaned down, placing his hands upon Derek's upper arms, "It's getting dark and I want us to get to

shelter, okay? It's not your fault, but you've been slowing us down trying to pull your weight, so I'm taking up some of the slack."

"All right," Derek sighed reluctantly, then raised a hand in a mocking salute, "Yes, sir!"

They settled down beneath a rocky overhang shortly after darkness had fallen, the crackling fire Andros lit the only light on the entire landscape. On Andros' insistence, Derek slept on the side closest to the sheer wall of the cliff that delimited part of their shelter, leaving the turian the more exposed spot facing the distant river: though they had seen little sign of animal life on the planet, let alone predators, Andros wasn't prepared to take any chances when his oldest friend was vulnerable.

Andros slept poorly that night. His dreams were disturbed, littered with shadowy figures intent on harming the myriad of representations of Derek his mind conjured, and nothing but he, a lone turian, stood in their way. He would barely rest for an hour before his eyes would snap open, staring out into the darkness, expecting at any moment to catch sight of movement.

During these wakeful patches Andros would stoke and add more vegetation to the fire before returning to his sleeping bag. After the first of his dreams he had removed his pistol from its holster and laid it next to his spot, reassuringly close at hand should anything emerge into their tiny circle of warmth and light.

He could see little more than the shape of Derek's suit in the flickering light, the human himself indistinguishable as he lay on the edge of the firelight's influence, yet he would still watch him in between checking the entrance to their decidedly unprotected shelter. He would eventually fall back to sleep after a short while, only to awake again to start the cycle once more.

Despite his restless night, it was Andros who awoke first when sunlight drowned the little illumination the remaining embers of their fire could provide. He lay there for a few moments, listening and watching intently for any hint of danger, but their spot was silent. Slipping from his sleeping bag, he made his quiet way over to where their backpacks still stood propped against the wall of the cliff.

With two portions of nutri-paste and a pair of filled cups in his hands, he knelt down at Derek's side to rouse him; yet there was no head poking out of his suit.

"Derek?" Andros said, glancing about with the thought that the human might have wandered off while he was sleeping; he would never have left his suit behind, though.

"Derek?!" he called, alarm rising within him. He shouldn't have slept; he should have stayed on watch throughout the night!

And then a groggy groan came from the depths of the suit.

"Derek?" the turian said once more, his eyes returning to the seemingly empty armour.

Another groan. "Who else would it b...be?"

Through the neck hole, crawling into view, was Derek: a much, much smaller Derek than Andros remembered, even from the previous day.

"Oh, Derek..." Andros whispered despairingly, reaching out to assist the human from the suit that now could not possibly fit him.

From Derek's perspective, the turian looked quite huge: towering above him like he had reverted to being a toddler, the gentle hands grasping him large enough to wrap almost entirely around his torso.

After a few moments of twisting and squirming, Derek managed to squeeze his shoulders through the neck hole. Now he sat, naked, against the rocky wall behind him while Andros knelt over him.

"Eat," Andros instructed, presenting the shrunken man before him with a cup and some nutri-paste, "Eat, and I'll try to fashion something for you to wear."

Derek did as the turian asked, shivering slightly as he watched Andros fish his undergarments out from within his now empty, useless suit and start to cut them up with the aid of his claws and a few of the sharper rocks littering the area.

Though he was able to drink down the whole cup of water – albeit clumsily, requiring both hands to hold the vessel – at least half the package of nutri-paste remained by the time he had consumed his fill.

"You want the rest of this?" he asked the turian.

Andros looked up from his work – he was at the point of reattaching two pieces of torn cloth with twigs that had escaped the fire; Derek's lack of appetite concerned him as much as his shrinkage.

"We'll...save it for later," he answered quietly, taking the proffered packet and returning it to his bag, "I'm sure you'll get hungry again."

After half an hour's work, Andros had some rudimentary garments to keep Derek covered: he had sliced off the sleeves of the shirt, cut strips out of the sides, and halved its length with the sticks stitching it back together in a primitive imitation of a vest, following a similar process with the underwear.

"Better than nothing," Derek said as he put the two items on; neither fit him well, but they were close enough to do the job, "Thanks."

Andros said nothing on the subject, instead addressing a new concern: "I know you won't like the idea, but I think I should carry you today."

Indeed, Derek wasn't fond of this proposition, but seeing as he was now barely as tall as one of the turian's legs, he nodded reluctantly.

The turian hesitated before he spoke again, another idea in his mind: "If I squeeze more into my backpack and dump non-essentials, you could probably sit in your bag and I'll be able to carry you more easily."

Derek didn't like this idea much either, but after it transpired that he fitted very comfortably inside the pack he had so recently carried upon his own back he was forced to agree.

With his dwindling companion slung over one shoulder and their remaining supplies hanging from the other, Andros strode out from their crude shelter to head southwards once more: the zigzag path to survey the area more thoroughly was forgotten, for there were more significant matters at stake. The lengthy process of manufacturing even those simplest of garments for the

human meant that the sun was already accelerating rapidly towards its highest position in the sky, leaving little time for them to keep to their scheduled progress.

Though he remained alert for further chasms and the like, the turian was quite preoccupied. Seeing Derek at his first stage of shrinking was concerning, but not something that couldn't have been handled – medical science could do wonders these days, after all. Now, though, now he was quite alarmed: it wasn't the human's new size that truly bothered him, moreover that the process was continuing and, as far as one could presume, hadn't yet finished.

What if he vanished completely, simply shrank out of existence? Surely not. Surely whatever had triggered this degeneration wouldn't cause that degree of damage. Derek would stop shrinking by the time they reached the rendezvous and they'll be able to treat him; they *had to* be able to treat him! He couldn't part with his oldest friend, not before he had the chance to tell him...

"How are you holding up?" Andros asked, peering over his shoulder in Derek's direction.

The bag in which the human sat jostled against the back plate of Andros' armour: Derek had been startled out of a reverie of his own.

It would have been impossible for Derek, curled up inside a backpack designed for small goods as he was, not to dwell on his predicament, just like Andros was doing. He could have lived, perhaps not happily but without too much difficulty as a person merely of meagre stature: there are worse fates than not being able to reach the top shelf. Indeed, remaining as tall as he was now would have been bearable, provided he had assistance at hand. Yet he somehow suspected that his makeshift carrycase would not remain as cramped as it was now. His thoughts had not advanced as far as the prospect of disappearing completely as Andros' had, yet he still ruminated on the possibility of being so small as to fit into someone's pocket; if that happened, maybe the turian would be inclined to keep him in a roomy cage as his pet human – not the future he had envisaged for he and Andros, but it was still something.

"What?" he muttered distractedly, looking in the direction of the flanging voice, though his view of Andros' face was obscured by his cowl, "I'm fine. Could be better, but yeah."

"Hungry or thirsty at all?"

"I'm fine," Derek said again, sighing a little; not wanting to seem unappreciative of the concern, he added, "Thanks, though."

The turian said nothing, instead reaching behind him to give the bag in which Derek rode a couple of gentle pats.

Derek sighed again: as humiliating and terrifying his situation was, he was still extremely glad that he had Andros with him.

"How far from the river are we?" he asked, aware that the mountains seemed little more distant than they had been when they had set out.

"We're not going to the river," Andros answered. He paused in his explanation, choosing his words. "I...I'm abandoning the mission, you're more important," he finished eventually, his voice cracking slightly.

Derek's imagination immediately latched onto those last few words. In what way was he 'more important'? Not to the mission if it was being called off. Not to the service – he held only a

junior rank. As a friend, perhaps? They had known each other an awful long time, after all. But could Andros mean something more than that? Surely that was too much to hope for.

When the sun had already become partially obscured by the peaks to their left, casting them and the surrounding foothills into deep shadow, Derek could see the ground sloping upwards, the mountains sliding away from them.

“What are you- “

“There are some woods in this gully, we’ll need a fire tonight.”

The patch of trees was on the very edge of the shadowed area which was growing ever so slightly larger with each passing moment. There were barely more than a dozen and, fortunately, no sign of any other variety of plant life.

Andros lowered both backpacks to the ground and set them against one of the trunks, both he and it seeming to tower above the diminutive human.

“Stay here,” the turian ordered, withdrawing a knife from the other pack, “I won’t stray far from you, but don’t wander off.”

Once Derek had nodded, Andros moved away to search out fuel for the night.

Derek sat where he was, doing precisely as he was told despite it making him feel extremely vulnerable; he would have preferred to be moving, to stick close by the turian’s reassuring presence, but now was not the time to disobey orders. To make himself feel a little safer, he pulled the other bag closer – with some difficulty – and began to rummage in the hopes of locating his pistol.

Had it not been for the sound of a twig cracking coming from quite the opposite direction that which the turian had gone, Derek would probably never have noticed. He turned, his pupils dilating immediately as he saw, stalking towards him on six short, powerful legs, the first fauna they had discovered on the planet. Its skin, completely smooth, was a reddish colour that made it look as though it had been flayed; its jaw appeared to be jointed the wrong way – the lower remaining in place while the upper, where the nose and eyes were located, hinged backwards; and, though it was certainly smaller than a varren, it looked quite huge to the shrunken man.

“Andros!” he yelled in terror, flattening himself against the base of the tree.

His voice, echoing slightly around the copse, seemed to startle the animal for a moment: it stared at him, its eyes almost completely black save for a thin, pale ring around the outside. It recovered quickly, however, leaning back to coil its muscles, ready to pounce.

*BLAM! BLAM!*

Before it could leap, the creature keeled over, laying motionless on its side.

“So much for thinking this place was safe,” Andros muttered as he approached, keeping his pistol drawn and aimed at Derek’s erstwhile hunter. He looked down at the human, concern etched across his face. “You okay?”

Derek nodded, his breathing fast and shallow. “Just...just shaken.”

When the animal didn’t stir after nudging it with his foot, Andros felt safe to holster his weapon.

"Time to find shelter for the night," he said, picking both bags up again, "I think I've found enough firewood for us. Mind if it shares space with you?"

By the time darkness had settled on their portion of the planet again they had laid claim to another cave; Andros insisted upon checking it thoroughly for any more animals with designs upon his precious cargo before allowing Derek to settle down inside.

The fire had burned itself out by morning, though its remains still smouldered in the narrow entrance to the cave. Either by coincidence due to the tight fit within the fissure or as a subconscious protective urge, Andros awoke with a one hand upon Derek's arm; an arm which had once again withered in the night.

"This is getting really serious," the turian said once he had shaken his friend awake, "We can't afford to dawdle."

Derek sat up on the dusty, rocky floor of the cave; though Andros was kneeling, retrieving their bags from the shadowy corner a few feet deeper within their shelter, he towered over the human who now would only rank among the smallest of dwarves.

"Here," Andros said, offering Derek the opening to the pack in which he had ridden the previous day, "We'll breakfast on the move."

Derek crawled in, immediately finding himself being hoisted into the air once he was wholly inside. There was no need for him to curl up now: standing on the floor of the bag, he could barely peek out at the world travelling rapidly by as the turian hurried across the landscape. Derek therefore settled to his nutri-paste sat within the dark confines of the backpack, though he hardly made a dent in what would once have been a standard morning ration for him.

Spurred on by deepest worry for his friend and the gathering, ominously dark clouds on the horizon, Andros only stopped once the entire day: he was brought to a halt by a cliff, ten metres or so high, gouged away over the years by the stream that ran past its base. Its stone face was jagged and uneven, providing numerous hand and footholds; the turian was on the move again within a few short moments.

At the first spots of rain, Andros began to seek out a new cave in which to pass another night; a roomy crack in the rock presented itself by the time the wind was beginning to pick up, providing the best shelter they had known since arriving on the planet.

A new fire was already crackling near the cave entrance when Derek was helped out of his transport; he and Andros settled down against opposite walls within the flickering, cosy orange glow. Neither said anything for a time, merely soaking in the warmth while a storm whipped itself into a frenzy outside, almost seeming to disturb the winds of thought within their minds.

"Do you think it's going to stop?" Derek asked eventually.

Andros merely looked down at the human whose voice was noticeably higher than it had been even yesterday; he knew he wasn't referring to the weather, but that made it no easier to give an answer, not one that would reassure either of them at least.

"Be honest with me," Derek pressed. He had shrunk beyond the garments Andros had whittled for him, so he sat upon a torn piece of cloth with another wrapped about him.

Andros continued to gaze at his tiny friend mutely, his reason battling with his emotion, clouding his choice of words; after all, though, Derek had asked him to be honest.

"I...no, probably not."

Derek nodded glumly. His chin rested upon his knees, staring straight ahead of him at the pair of turian feet, each almost as big as he was now. If he was to continue dwindling at this kind of rate, perhaps it was time to throw caution to the fierce wind howling past their cave and reveal those things which he had tried to keep hidden from the veritable giant looking down at him so forlornly.

"I want to tell you something..." There was no turning back after saying that, the ice was broken. "We've been friends forever, basically, and I value that friendship more than...more than anything. But ever since we started basic training, maybe even before that, I've...I've thought of you as more than just a friend."

Andros was watching intently now, his eyes a little wider, his mandibles quivering ever so slightly as his mind pieced together what Derek was hinting at, a cruel, ironic hope rising inside him.

Derek had not lifted his gaze and he paused, momentarily wondering whether he was speaking to Andros or merely the objects of his scrutiny; a tiny smile flitted across his face before he continued, "You probably don't want to hear that, especially not now, but, well..." he looked up, tilting his head back to find the turian's face, "I love you."

Andros was still staring, but the intensity of it had changed: it was stronger, yet softer; happier, though also sadder.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he asked, aware of his own hypocrisy, "I feel the same way."

Derek chuckled a little, though the sound was quite hollow. "What fools we've been, huh?"

Andros nodded. He leaned forward, tentatively reaching out towards the shrunken human before him; when Derek did not object, he lifted him into his arms, cradling him to his chest in the gentlest hug he could manage.

"What might have been..." he lamented, stroking the back of Derek's head softly.

Derek nodded, patting the turian's chest piece. "What's done is done, though. And better late than never."

Andros nodded too.

The two of them soon went quiet again, simply enjoying the tender intimacy, though it wasn't what either of them had ever pictured.

It was Derek who chose to break the silence: "Andros?"

"Yes, Derek?"

"There's something else I want to...confess, I guess."

"I'm listening."

"See..." the human began, uncertain exactly how to explain; perhaps bluntness would be best: "I've always liked feet. Especially...especially yours."

Andros blinked, releasing his grip on Derek slightly, looking down at him, to his own two-toed feet, then back to Derek. "You like my feet?"

"Yeah..." Derek said, a blush forming on his cheeks, "There's just something about them. I find them attractive, I guess."

The turian actually managed a small, genuine laugh. "Well, thank you. You're most welcome to touch them if you want to."

"Are you serious?" the human asked, looking up at Andros in surprise.

"Of course!"

Andros drew the tiny figure away from his chest and placed him gently down between his feet, feeling a pang of sadness at how gigantic they looked in comparison with Derek's entire, vastly diminished being.

The remainder of the evening passed with the pair sharing their deepest feelings, their darkest secrets, reminiscing about times they had spent together, how their hidden romantic feelings for one another had shaped their friendship; one might have been forgiven for thinking that they had forgotten about Derek's ongoing shrinking.

While they talked, Derek gently rubbed the soles of the turian's feet, picking dead skin and flecks of dirt from them, between his toes, and from his long talons. To the human, the whole experience was a joy: he had finally been given an opportunity to acquaint himself with what had been, for some years now, objects of great desire and the process of cleaning them was deeply cathartic.

Andros too found the sensation of those tiny hands massaging gently over his sore, tired feet, prising stubborn and unnoticed contaminants from them to be surprisingly enjoyable. He felt far more relaxed than he should have considering how close his oldest friend and newly revealed mutual crush was to becoming too small to see.

Derek's first yawn was the signal to the turian that, enjoyable though their activities were, it was time to rest up for another day of journeying that loomed on the metaphorical horizon. As he lay down, however, an idea occurred to Andros.

"Here," he muttered sleepily.

Scooping Derek off the floor, he tucked him gently into the curve of his cowl, the human's face close to his chin.

"Just in case the storm gets in," he explained, closing his eyes, "Good night."

"Night," Derek mumbled in return, "Love you."

"I love you too."

The storm had all but passed come morning, though a light rain still pattered on the exposed rock just beyond the cave entrance. The soothing sound prolonged the sleep of the two adventurers who remained supine for close to an hour longer than they would normally have done, eating into the time they had to reach the rendezvous.

This time it was Derek who awoke first, but he was quite sure that he was still dreaming when he had opened his eyes: he didn't find himself stretched out upon the floor of the cave, nor curled around the inside of the turian's cowl, but resting upon a vast plain that curved slowly away on either side of him – like the oddly spherical asteroid he had once visited – yet which stretched onward towards a curious mass he could not quite discern at first despite its familiarity; once his thoughts had collated, he realised that it was Andros' head and that he was a mere speck laying on his neck.

With this realisation came another: even the tiniest slip on the turian's part would leave Derek little more than a red smudge on his skin. Knowing that Andros would need to be aware of his new, miniscule dimensions before he could be safely handled, Derek edged down the slop that led to the floor rather than the inside of the turian's cowl, hoping that he would survive the fall.

Landing safely with a well-practiced roll, Derek hastened away from the titan, taking up a position upon one of the stones the turian had placed around their long-dead campfire: here at least he was unlikely to be caught underfoot, and the elevation might just make him prominent enough for Andros to notice him. All he could do now was wait.

Andros stirred a few minutes later. The instant he became aware of his surroundings, he placed a hand gingerly inside his cowl to locate Derek but found nothing but his own skin.

"Derek?" he called softly, sitting up and casting his sharp eyes around the interior of the cave.

"I'm here!" Derek yelled back.

Evidently his voice was too faint for the turian to hear him at this distance, however, as Andros continued to call for him, beginning to search among their bags. Finding nothing there, the turian proceeded, on all-fours, towards the cave entrance to survey their surroundings for any sign of his greatest friend; when he neared the makeshift firepit, he caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eye.

When Andros had faced him and had begun to approach, Derek had started leaping about atop the rock, waving his arms feverishly and shouting at the top of his voice in the hopes of attracting the turian's attention, all the while watching him looming ever larger in his vision.

On realising that it was not an insect crawling about so unwisely at the edge of the undoubtedly still warm ashes, his mouth fell open.

"Derek?" he said again, this time in utter disbelief.

The turian's voice was like a cacophony of reverberating noise to the tiny human who clapped his hands over his ears instinctively. He tried to shout back, asking Andros to speak more softly, but the turian could hear little more than a faint squeaking.

Dismayed, Andros gently lay a hand down beside his practically microscopic companion, lifting him slowly up to eye level once Derek had climbed aboard.

"I'm sorry," Andros whispered to the speck seated upon his palm, "Is this better?"

"Yes. Can you hear me?" Derek said in reply; when the turian merely stared at him blankly, he raised his voice to a yell, "Can you hear me?"

"Just."

Simultaneously, they both sighed in defeat.

"I guess this is it, then," Derek shouted, "our last chance to talk."

Andros gazed sadly at his friend whose details he could barely discern now. "Yeah...I'm sorry, Derek."

"It is what it is."

Andros sighed again. "What do you want to do?"

Derek shrugged, though Andros could hardly tell. "I don't know," he called back, "I need to think about it."

The turian nodded before making a hesitant suggestion, "Would you...would you like spend some time on my feet while you think?"

Blushing a little, Derek nodded. "I'd like that."

Keeping his hand as steady as possible, Andros sat back against the wall of the cave as he had done the night before, then leaned forward to deposit the human between the toes of his left foot. "Bite me or something if you need my attention," he instructed, certain that it would be the oddest order he would ever dish out.

Derek staggered a little on landing, the drop from the turian's hand having been greater for the bug-sized human than Andros had anticipated. Once he had found his feet, Derek looked up; rising high above him, like two fleshy skyscrapers, were Andros' toes, each topped by immense, tapered spires. The turian's body heat billowed from the ground and those two towers, surrounding Derek in a cosy bubble. He sighed, even managing a smile: this, more than it ever could have been before now, was his happy place.

Taking a few steps to his left, Derek reached one of those two massive toes. Though not as supple as it had been when he had first been given access to them the night before, the surface of the appendage did still have a pleasing degree of give to it as he pressed a hand to it. Smiling more widely, he began to rub in wide circles across the dimpled and furrowed skin, the details of which were so much more apparent to him now.

He knew that Andros would hardly be aware of what he was doing, probably barely able to see or feel him down here, so caution caught a stiff breeze and was carried far away as he now pressed his face close to that monolithic toe; the smell of sweat, dirt, and, strongest of all, Andros' own alluring scent filtered into the human's nostrils. He smiled still more, bestowing a soft kiss upon the living wall before him: if he was to shrink out of the plain of existence shared by humans, turians, and the other great races of the Milky Way – as he was certain was to be the case – this would surely be his ideal new world.

Several more minutes passed before Derek reluctantly bit the turian's toe as hard as he dared; Andros, though far from pained or harmed by this, did at least feel it enough to retrieve the human from his foot.

"I've made my decision," Derek shouted once he was up close to Andros' face once more.

Andros nodded gently, whispering back, "And?"

Colour rose in Derek's face, but there was no backing out or changing his mind now. "If I keep shrinking, I would like to make my home on your foot."

Andros was surprised at how unsurprising he found this request, smiling in spite of the gloomy nature of this discussion. "If that's what you want, then that's what will happen," he murmured, "What would you like me to do with you in the meantime?"

Derek hadn't considered that, but his answer came swiftly: "I should be safe enough between your toes before I shrink, so if you put me in your boot before you leave..."

"I'll have to leave soon to make it to the rendezvous."

"Then let's do it now," Derek said decisively, feeling himself starting to tear up.

Andros nodded again. "I'll miss you, Derek."

"I'll miss you too. At least we'll be together in a way, right?" he said with a weak laugh.

"In a way, yeah."

Andros lowered his hand to be level with his mouth. Derek didn't need an explanation for what the turian had in mind: he stepped forward to the edge of the palm on which he stood to press his first, and last, kiss to Andros' lip.

"I love you," the turian breathed once Derek had retreated, his voice trembling.

"I love you too," Derek yelled back.

They gazed at each other for one final moment before Andros placed the tiny human tenderly between his toes, slipped on his boots, seized the backpacks, then finally departed.

As moving from his spot nestled in the crook of Andros' toes would have resulted in some very messy, very painful consequences, Derek did his best to remain in place. With little else to do while he waited for the shrinking to resume, he fell into a doze that lasted most of the day, waking only occasionally and very briefly before returning to his light slumber; the warmth emanating from the turian kept him feeling drowsy, the motion of his feet shifting about within the confines of its boot while he walked on through the wilderness rocking the tiny human in an oddly comforting fashion.

When he finally awoke fully, nothing remained of the world Derek knew as his own. He was laying on his back on a vast tan landscape in what seemed to be a valley with steep hills on either side, a valley so long he could not make out where it began or where it ended; anything more distant than those hills was lost in the dim light. The ground was comfortable: soft enough to rest upon, but firm enough underfoot, and exuded its own heat which would make such things as clothing and fires quite unnecessary.

Derek clambered to his feet and struck out for the nearer of the two slopes, his bare feet making not a sound. He seemed quite alone in this place, allowed to ascend to the summit quite undisturbed, finding ridges running parallel to the valley floor with which he could pull himself up when the incline became extreme.

By the time he stood at the top of the rise the sun seemed to have risen, though he knew well that this was not quite the case; nevertheless, his new vantage point coupled with this almost

dazzling illumination permitted him a glimpse of his new world, a true understanding of his future. In every direction, as far as the eye could see, were more valleys just like that which he had just left behind, all wending their way in the same general direction. Dotted here and there amongst them were caves, spaced evenly and, from Derek's perspective, sparsely.

This, then, was Andros' foot.

Somewhere in the distance, beyond the range of his vision, Derek knew would rise a mountain of impossible size, towering above this rolling landscape; its twin would be in the opposite direction. What intrigued him was that, though certain he was still in the gap between the turian's toes which were presumably parallel with the ground most of the time, he seemed no longer subject to XK-72's gravity; instead it was Andros, now a being so unfathomably gigantic, who held gravitational sway over Derek.

Smiling a little to himself, the brave, microscopic explorer started down the slope into the next valley with purpose in his stride: there was much to learn about survival on this hitherto uncharted world.

When Andros next removed his boots, he saw not a trace of Derek inside it or on his foot, a bittersweet moment: no bloody smear at least meant that the human was safe, albeit never to be seen again.

Andros reached the rendezvous point right on schedule.

"Where is your partner?" asked the salarian recording the arrivals of the scouting parties.

Andros had been preparing for this question ever since he had placed Derek inside his boot, ultimately deciding that it was in their best interests to twist the truth: "Missing, presumed dead. He fell into a crevasse, body unrecoverable, unable to request assistance. I'll put the details in my report."

The salarian nodded gravely. "I'm sorry. We shall see that he is honoured for his work."

Muttering his thanks, Andros boarded the waiting shuttle.

*Mission to planet XK-72; Scout Team Delta report.*

*Assigned region contained scarce animal life; only form encountered an opportunistic predator.*

*Large river and numerous smaller waterways, uncertain suitability for consumption and industrial use.*

*Abundant dry grassland, pockets of lush, dense vegetation. WARNING: hazardous flora; includes specimen that destroys electrical equipment, includes specimen with adverse effects to human health.*

*WARNING: terrain unstable, numerous chasms which appear to form suddenly and unpredictably, claimed life of human member of party.*

*Recommendation: unsuitable for habitation, unacceptable risk to life and property.*

Andros gave his notice immediately after he had submitted his report and requested that he be returned to the Citadel. His first duty was to inform Derek's family of his demise and to commiserate with them, staying with them until his funeral service had been conducted; only once the white lie was completed did he return to his own modest apartment and put in practice the second of his plans.

"Table for one, is it, sir?"

"Yes, thank you," Andros said to the slightly surprised asari greeter.

She guided him to a secluded table in a corner of the restaurant, handed him a menu, then returned to the door.

"Not quite how we planned it, but here we are," Andros murmured to himself, gazing around the interior of Panaminos. He poured himself a glass of water from the jug provided, a couple of ice cubes clattering their way in. "Here's to you, Derek," he whispered, raising the glass to no one visible, "I still love you, forever and always."

Derek felt that he ought to be congratulated on how quickly and easily he adapted to his new existence as the sole inhabitant of Andros' foot – if there had been anyone around to congratulate him, of course. He often imagined himself being questioned on his life by some esteemed anthropologist who, naturally, would have been totally baffled by how he'd survived a week, let alone the several years that had passed since he had established himself here: how could one survive without plants, animals, or a source of fresh water?

The answer was that Derek needed none but the last. He came to regard himself as something of a guardian of this strange land – *Keeper of the Valleys* was what he liked to call himself in moments of whimsy – in that he took it upon himself to cleanse Andros' foot of dead skin which acted as his primary source of food. Of course, he had competition for this job: other microscopic creatures inhabited these valleys alongside him, but Derek was ready for them if they ever came to challenge him: he had his spear whittled from a splinter he had found lodged in one of the many caverns spread about the land.

It was within these caves that he often had to hide when the frequent, violent floods rushed across the landscape, washing away all in their path. In spite of the dangers these torrents posed to him, they were the source of nearly all the water he could gather, scooped from the puddles they left behind and stored in makeshift reservoirs fashioned from the more resilient varieties of skin Derek was able to harvest.

And so this was how Derek lived, moving from valley to valley in his nomadic existence, never staying in each for more than a day or two; though days now had very little meaning to him. Occasionally he would come across a fleck of vegetation which had escaped the purge of the floods, invariably claiming these bounties for his own to supplement his otherwise monotonous diet.

Beyond living from moment to moment, Derek did have one ambition: to reach, perhaps eventually to scale one of the twin peaks that formed the extreme ends of the region he inhabited. Though it had taken him the best part of two years' journeying from valley to valley, he had finally reached the foot of one of them. He had been prepared for it to be a true giant of a mountain, but its scale was far beyond anything he had anticipated: even when it finally became visible as a vague shadow in the distance, it stood so unimaginably tall above the rest of the landscape that its summit

was lost from view. Standing at its base, Derek could barely make out what he knew to be the joint in the titanic toe, yet he still harboured ambitions of climbing what was, comparatively at least, the largest mountain in existence.

When not exploring or going about the daily business of merely surviving, Derek did not lose sight of the fact that the ground beneath his feet was his friend, nor that he harboured deeply ingrained romantic feelings for him. He would therefore be found, during idle moments, to be speaking softly to the flat ground or the slope of a valley, caressing it, kissing it, simply pressing himself close to it. Though he could not realise his dreams of being a true couple with Andros – dreams that still remained vivid in his mind – he was glad at least that they were together, both in spirit and in body.

“Have you collated that data on violent crime for me yet, Andros?”

“Yes, sir. The computer’s just verifying that the figures tally with the source files, then I’ll send it to you.”

“Good. You can clock out after, enjoy your weekend.”

“Thank you, sir. You too.”

The grizzled older turian scoffed as he left the office, “Like I ever get a weekend.”

Sometimes Andros did miss the action and excitement of his previous life performing scouting expeditions, but he knew that kind of thing would just feel hollow and depressing these days. Not that his new work was particularly thrilling or fulfilling: back on the Citadel, working mostly in the back offices of C-Sec, although he would occasionally get the call to join an investigation or a patrol in the wards when staff were in short supply. He didn’t choose this life exhilaration, though: he wanted something quiet, something menial, something which allowed him time to spend alone and with the handful of people to whom he remained close.

With the computer’s approval, he sent the report that had been asked of him and made a hasty retreat to the elevator which would, eventually, take him home. When he had still been an adventurer by trade, his home was his old bedroom in his parents’ apartment: he had lived in barracks during his training but had been left to his own devices once his training was complete; as he would be spending so little time off alien worlds and Council ships, having a home of his own would have been a foolish waste. Now that he was essentially working a nine-to-five desk job, however, had at last struck out on his own, though only to the extent of living two levels below his parents. His apartment was small and unsophisticated, Andros freely admitted that, but it was comfortable and situated away from the more ‘problematic’ districts.

Despite having spent more or less the entire day seated behind a desk, Andros flopped wearily into an armchair in his living area the moment he arrived home, his eyes closed and his hands over his face. He sat like this for a time, breathing in deeply, then exhaling slowly. Try as he might, he just could not bring himself to be truly happy these days.

He kicked off his boots in the time-honoured fashion of all workers after a long day, stretching and wiggling his toes once they were free of their restrictive containers. At this point, however, his end-of-day ritual deviated from that of most: he raised one foot – always the same one – and propped it on the opposite knee, rubbing his toes lightly between fingers and thumb while gazing sadly down at them.

"Another boring day," he seemingly informed no one, "More reports, more statistics. I know I keep saying that I don't miss the action, but I wouldn't mind a day on patrol or something. I'm not cut out for endless paperwork."

He sighed, his eyes now fixed upon the space between his toes. "But it wouldn't be the same without you, would it? I couldn't chart new planets without you by my side."

"At least it's the weekend, right? I'm taking your folks to Panaminos, like we were planning to. And I think I'll visit my parents too. I've probably told you this before, but I do that a lot, visit them. There's nothing a mother's hug can't fix...well, almost nothing."

He smiled sadly to himself, the image of the one person he wished he could see above all others flashing through his mind as he closed his eyes. Scared that he might forget that most precious of faces, Andros had secretly downloaded his old friend's photo off his C-Sec file; never a day went by without him at least glancing at it.

Before he lowered his foot back to the floor so he could head to the kitchen for his instant dinner, he murmured once more to his foot, "I still love you, Derek. Someday. Someday..."