

Mass Effect: Eridium Dreams

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Chapter 6: 2383CE – A New Enemy?

Shepard couldn't help the bounce in her step as she maneuvered through the SSV Normandy. This was *her* ship in a way that very few serving officers ever got to claim. Technically, she might only be the XO, with Captain Anderson being the commanding officer. But she and Mira had taken part in the actual design and construction of the vessel over the past two years. In fact, the visual cloak that allowed the oversized frigate to be a *true* stealth vessel had been almost entirely her work. Not to mention the help she and Mira had given to the team working to integrate a Mass Effect drive core with an Eridium powerplant. They'd needed the Tantalus Drive Core to make the new gravity-based stealth engines work, using it to project a gravity field ahead of the ship for it to 'fall' into. But no human ship, not even one co-designed with the Turians, was going to miss out on Eridium Energy Shields, Energy Torpedoes, and a gravity-lensed main grazer. All of which demanded an Eridium power plant to go along with the Mass Effect based Drive Core.

The resulting vessel had been an expensive R&D project. But it was the first ship ever built that fully fused Mass Effect and Eridium tech, taking the best of both systems and seamlessly working them into a single cohesive ship. It had ultimately necessitated the Normandy's size, the two hundred forty meter frigate being nearly large enough to be called a small cruiser. But with the ability to fully stealth, even from visual sensors, it was still unquestionably a scout frigate...if an overly well-armed one. She honestly suspected they wouldn't build very many of her class. But what they had learned building her would enable both Human and Turian fleets to build cruisers and dreadnaughts that took the best-of-both-worlds-approach.

Shepard was extremely proud of the Normandy, which explained why she had agreed to shift back to a combat role in order to be the ship's XO. That she'd be serving under Anderson again also had something to do with it...as did his hints that something 'more exciting' might be in her future if she went along with it. She still wasn't quite sure what he'd been hinting at. But given the unexpected presence of Spectre Nihlus Kryik on what was *supposed* to be just a shakedown cruise, whatever it was would be probably be revealed soon. The composition of the rest of her fire team was equally telling, if a little alarming. Kadian Alenko had been pulled straight from N7 training to join her, and a second Siren from the Normandy Project had been recruited to round them out. Miranda Lawson was utterly brilliant, but also passed her 20 years of mandatory combat service. Given how happy she'd seemed to be in R&D, Shepard had no idea what they'd offered her to get her to switch. And whatever they needed two Sirens, an N7 biotic, and a Turian Spectre for...

She shook off the thought as she reached the cockpit.

Half an hour later, after getting confirmation they'd be arriving at their destination in an hour, Shepard found herself in the ship's small observation room with the Spectre Nihlus and Captain Anderson. From the serious look on their faces, she was pretty sure she was finally going to get some

information on why the ship was so heavily loaded for a 'shakedown cruise.' Anderson sighed at her wry expression and started talking.

"Yes, Shepard, there is obviously more to this mission than anyone was told. Two days ago, there was an attack on a secure convoy moving from Eden Prime to the Citadel. Any attack moving between locations that secure would warrant looking into, but the cargo being moved in this case has the Citadel up in arms. Nihlus?"

The Turian Spectre reached forward and tapped a key, bringing up a series of images on the room's holo display. A dig site, and what looked like...

"Some sort of Protean tech?"

The Turian's faceplates shifted in a grimace, even as he nodded.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to how dismissive humans are of Protean finds. This isn't just a piece of their tech, it's a Beacon. A working one. Every time one like it has been found, Mass Effect technology has jumped forward centuries for whoever finds it. So much so that Citadel law now requires all such finds to be shared with the galactic community as a whole, to prevent one race from jumping too far ahead of others."

Anderson's grin was *just* this side of mischief for a moment as he interjected.

"Humanity had no issue with that, of course. We barely used Mass Effect technology, after all. When this thing turned up, we were happy to pawn it off on the Citadel." The mischief fled from his expression as a grimace took its place. "At least we were. Right up until someone hit our convoy. It was escorted, of course, but only by a frigate wolfpack. We might not care much about the Beacon, but we still didn't want to draw too much attention to it."

Nihlus took over again as he tapped a key, showing the aftermath of the battle. Mostly, floating hulks that used to be ships and a debris field.

"The biggest issue is exactly *who* hit the convoy. There is strong evidence that it was a Geth attack. Strong enough for us to have moved a Turian patrol fleet into the Hades Cluster to try and cut them off from the Veil. Thankfully, that effort succeeded, even if it cost the Citadel fleet more than I'd like to admit. Particularly given that it didn't even finish the job. The Geth vessels disabled didn't have the Beacon on board, meaning that the one vessel that fled the battle still has it. It fled into the Hoplos system, where a human survey team reported spotting it crash-landing on the world of Trident."

Anderson reached over, tapping the controls himself, to bring up the data on Trident. A glance told Shepard the story in a few lines. A water world, with barely any land mass, and covered in violent weather. Of interest due to some valuable resources, but currently uninhabited.

"Our job is simple. Get it, retrieve the Beacon by any means necessary, get back out and retreat to the Citadel. Conditions on the surface mean using a small team will be better than trying to land serious forces, so we were elected for the job. Which does bring up one more point. Nihlus?"

The Turian nodded, even as Anderson turned the holo display off.

“Obviously, this isn’t what I was originally assigned to the Normandy for. It was merely convenient that we were already ready to be deployed. What I was actually assigned for was to assess you, Commander, for potential inclusion in the Spectre program.”

Sae blinked, caught off guard by the unexpected revelation. Before she could fully process that revelation, Anderson spoke up in a voice she recognized as his best attempt to pitch a crazy idea to her.

“I know you’ve been considering getting out of the military entirely Shepard, despite how unusual that is for Sirens. This would be a good step for you, to get out from under a lot of the red tape that annoys you, while still making use of your skills. Not just your combat skills, either. Spectres often handle specialist operations that mean your technical skills are just as valuable to them as your combat ability.”

Nihlus nodded at that.

“While all Specters are capable combatants, the truth is that the majority of us have other skills as well. I, myself, am a criminal investigator. My mentor specialized in technology, being familiar enough with the bleeding edge of cybernetics and near-AI to be assigned to a lot of cases of suspected research violations in either area. Saren was, in fact, one of the Spectres that helped clear the Siren Program’s cybernetics as within legal limits of Citadel law. Most Specters have one or more similar areas of specialization.”

That...made a lot of sense. It didn’t quite fit the general image of Spectre Operatives that the public had, but it certainly jived with the little she knew about their operations from Alliance briefings. She hadn’t really looked into them, as she’d been back in R & D by the time the Alliance had finally been pressured into accepting Spectres in humanity’s space. Specifically, in fact, she’d been working R & D for the Normandy. Even so, she’d picked up bits and pieces here and there, and put out a few feelers when she’d learned at the last minute that there would be a Spectre aboard the Normandy. Putting what they’d both said together with what she knew, she had to admit it made a potentially good fit for her. Still...

“That’s a lot to take it. I genuinely don’t know enough about the Spectres to even consider it properly.”

Nihlus nodded, seemingly unphased.

“You still need to be evaluated by a current Spectre, anyway. Which is why I’m here. We’ll work together on a few operations, starting with the recovery of the beacon. Then go from there.”

Reasonable. She gave a curt nod, even as she put the Spectre idea to the side for the moment. Right now, there was still a mission to be completed.

“Right. So, Miranda and I are both Javelin rated. Do you think we should insert from orbit with them or...”

Anderson was quickly pulled back in as the three of them planned out their operation, at least as much as they could based on the scant information they had access to...

Chapter 7: 2383CE – What’s in a Geth?

Shepard grunted as the orbital drop pod hit the ground. Despite the internal dampening of the Pod, it had been a rough ride down through Trident’s weather. Something made worse by the use of an infantry insertion pod rather than a Javelin. They had, with a little reluctance, discarded the idea of using the Javelins for the op. While the extra firepower would have been nice, chances were they would have to fight *inside* the grounded Geth vessel. Given the size of even the smallest Javelin, they weren’t exactly intended to fight in the cramped corridors of a ship. Which left them hitting ground on foot, using drop pods for rapid insertion not far from where sensors said the Geth ship had crashed.

This was far from the first time Sae had done an orbital drop, of course, and she was quick to blow the door, triggering a Phase Walk the moment she did. One of the massively underestimated advantages Phase Walk provided was a momentary slowing of the perception of time from the Siren’s perspective. It was a fact every veteran Siren learned to take advantage of, using the moments of slowed time to rapidly assess their situation. She did that very thing now, only to relax a tiny amount as she saw no hostiles that hadn’t already been taken out by the kinetic energy of the pod landing. She released Phase Walk after a very short hop to clear the Pod, quickly checking the waypoints on her HUD for the other pods signals. Kaidan’s was closest, Nihlus’s farthest, but Miranda’s was the closest to the Geth position. It was a simple decision to point herself toward Miranda, pinging her fellow Siren to let her know she was incoming and from where. Taking off at a jog, she’d almost reached Miranda when the other Siren’s surprised voice came over their comm net.

“Nihlus, why am I seeing two sets of Geth platforms fighting each other here?”

There was a heartbeat of pause, with the Turian’s voice coming back sounding flat.

“Repeat that, please.”

“I’m seeing two Geth groups fighting each other, same types of platforms, but different colors? Some sort of internal conflict? I didn’t think that...wait one.”

There was a pause, even as Sae carefully rounded the outcropping of rock between them and got eyes on both Miranda...and the two groups of Geth. Geth in mundane metallic silver were fighting others in a matte black, with the matte black Geth slowly winning. Miranda’s voice was incredulous as it came back over the comms.

“One group of Geth pinged my AI. They identified themselves as ‘True Geth’ and have requested to be added to our tac-net. They...Nihlus they have a Spectre ID code and it’s valid. Sending it to you.”

Miranda barely acknowledged Sae as she joined her fellow Siren. But Clive, Miranda’s AI, shot them an update tagging the matte black Geth as the ones in question. Sae frowned as she eyed the Geth combat units and their conflict carefully. Despite being less numerous than the regular metallic Geth, the matte black group was acting more fluidly, using more team tactics and proper combat formations. They were fighting as a cohesive unit far better than their opponents, and slowly winning because of it. Nihlus’s voice came back over the comm a few moments later.

“That’s Saren’s ID header. The code *is* valid, too. What the ancestors is going on here? I’m trying to...hold on.”

There was a pause, then a header identified as someone being added to the tac-net. A ping significantly closer to the Geth ship was suddenly on the map, even as another Turian voice growled across the comm.

“Nihlus. I assume you’re here for the Beacon? My Geth are keeping the Heretics contained, but they’ve got heavy units guarding the cargo bay. Could use some help to speed this up.”

“Saren, what the fuck are you doing working *with* the Geth. And why are they fighting amongst themselves?!”

There was a snort across the comm.

“No time for the long version. Short version is that there are two factions of Geth here. One of them, the Heretics, were responsible for hitting that convoy. The ones with me are part of the original Geth. There was a schism of sorts. It’s complicated. The True Geth are essentially refugees at this point, though. They are working with me to try to contain their brethren. Have been for months.”

There was a long pause, then Nihlus growled back.

“Find. Flagging your Geth as friendly for now. Going to need a hell of a lot more explanation after this is done with.”

“You’ll get it.”

Sae’s HUD updated a second later, flagging the matte black Geth as friendly. She shared a look with Miranda, then shrugged and nodded. She’d already unfolded her sniper to get a better look at the fighting, so she took just a moment to focus, then fired a highly-concentrated plasma round at the largest of the still-fighting ‘Heretics.’ The round completely ignored its barrier, proving that the Geth hadn’t yet managed to adapt to Eridium technology. The super-dense plasma bolt her sniper fired was more than enough burn right through the Geth’s center-mass, apparently hitting something critical enough that it collapsed a moment later.

Miranda didn’t have a Sniper, being an SMG girl at heart. Shepard could sympathize with that, preferring an up close and personal approach herself, same as most Sirens. At the moment, however, she signaled Miranda to advance only on the flank of the engagement, not quite willing to trust this second group of Geth yet. Miranda acknowledged, disappearing into her own Phase Walk even as Sae fired again, taking out the last remaining larger Geth. Doing so seemed to have some sort of knock-on effect to the enemy competence level, with ‘their’ Geth rapidly getting the advantage. An advantage that rapidly turned into outright victory as Miranda hit the Heretics from their left flank. Seconds later, it was over, just in time for Kaidan and Nihlus and Kadian to finally join them. The matte black Geth remaining hovered for only a moment for the site, before heading off at a run toward the downed ship.

“Curiouser and Curiouser.” Sae muttered, getting a nod from Miranda as she rejoined the group.

“More than curious. This is unheard of. There’s never been a sign that the Geth even *had* factions before. Now Saren is involved?”

There was obvious frustration in Nihlus’s voice, which pointedly wasn’t coming over the comm. Taking the cue, Sae signaled Miranda and Kaidan to mute theirs as well.

“You mentioned him as your mentor, right? And you have no idea what he’s up to?”

Nihlus’s head shake matched his grim expression.

“No. He’s been out of contact for almost six months. He *was* investigating anomalies along the Perseus Veil when he went radio silent, however. Given his areas of expertise, he was the logical person to investigate. The Spectre office was growing a bit concerned he hadn’t reported in, though.”

Sae hummed, fingers tapping her sniper in thought.

“His Geth do seem to be fighting these Heretics. Chances that he’s gone rogue?”

Nihlus hesitated for long moments.

“Slim. Not impossible, but slim. No, it’s likely he found something while looking into the Geth anomalies that forced him to take extreme measures in order to contain the issue. Keep your eyes open, but go along with it for now.”

Sae nodded. She could do that. Besides, this was the most interesting thing that had happened on an op in *years*. Maybe even a decade or two! Huh, is this why Asari matriarchs were all a little crazy? Probably. No matter, something to think about later.

“Well, if we want to see what it’s all about, I suggest we put our left foot in and shake it until the next verse.”

Sae would never admit how amusing she found both Kadian’s groan and Nihlus’s expression of sheer confusion as she took off. Though she might tell Miranda how sexy that amused smirk had been at some point. The younger woman was fun to flirt with, even if they’d yet to go beyond that...

Sae’s amusement had faded as they’d pushed toward Saren’s position. While there were several more squads of the matte black Geth around, it was clear that whatever ship had dropped them here must have been small, as they were outnumbered at least five to one by the Heretics. A fact that explained how Saren had gotten stalled trying to get into the downed cruiser’s cargo bay. When they’d finally reached him, they’d found him wrecking the absolute shit out of several armatures...but clearly starting to flag. Understandable, considering that they’d passed by a dozen more of that type, the name of which they’d only known from Saren’s own data feed, just reaching him. All of them had already been destroyed or crippled by the same mix of precision fire and biotics Sae witnessed on their arrival, giving her a very good idea just how skill Saren was.

As the fight they’d arrived to wound down with their added fire, Sae took a moment to observe the second Spectre as he wiped up the last of the Heretics at the choke point he’d been assaulting. She nodded, even as she blew the head off the last of the group she’d taken on. Saren was, if anything, a bit *better* than Nihlus, and Sae had developed a serious respect for how good Nihlus was as they’d punched their way through to Saren’s position. Unfortunately, he’d also lost the majority of his own Geth support at this point, though a few of the matte black units that had followed in the wake of her own team quickly started fortifying the position as they joined Saren. The Turian straightened up as they approached...and for the first time Shepard got a good look at the only other living sentient that seemed

to be working with Saren. A Quarian, a young one she thought, that was doing something to the Geth units Saren had downed. Saren held up a hand toward them and directed his attention to her.

“Anything, Tali?”

“Just a moment...yes! Got a snippet this time. Positive ID on the agent, finally. Hold on, I’ll display it.”

The kid tapped something out on her omni, which flashed up a small screen that played a video feed which, after a moment, Sae realized was from a Geth’s perspective.

“The beacon is being moved. Minimal security. It should be easy to...”

Sae barely registered her own movement, half instinctive as it had been. She’d dropped into Phase Walk even as she spun, buying herself a precious extra instant to react. To react to the fact that *Nihlus’s gun was almost all the way up and pointed at the back of Kadian’s skull*. Even with the extra speed Phase Walk gave her, she didn’t have nearly enough time to bring even her sidearm up. Instead, she completed the Phase Walk while desperately thrusting her fist out, pumping phasic energy into her own body to hit harder. She gasped in relief as her fist ended already inside Nihlus’s barrier and hammered him hard enough to throw him several meters, barely an instant before he could pull the trigger. Her other hand snapped up, a Distortion Blast forming...only to be preempted by Saren’s hand-canon of a sidearm punching three rounds in Nihlus’s face, the traitorous Spectre’s barrier having popped by the violence of his introduction to the cliff face via Sae’s fist.

“...need that beacon if we want any chance of finding the conduit.”

The voice of Nihlus Kryik spoke from the stunned Quarian’s omni-tool as the entire group stared at the mangled corpse of Saren’s fellow Spectre...

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