

Mass Effect: Eridium Dreams

(Chapters 8 & 9)

Novus Peregrine

Chapter 8: 2383CE – Explanations

After the betrayal of Nihlus, a grim mood had settled over everyone. That mood had *not* been conducive to the continued survival of the resisting Geth, however. With potent reinforcements in the form of Shepard's team, it hadn't taken long to wipe out the remaining opposition and recover the beacon. That, however, had led to their current situation as they demanded answers from Saren. Captain Anderson, along with Shepard and her ground team were seated on one side of a holo-table in the *Normandy's* small war room, with Saren, a Geth platform, and the young Quarian Saren had introduced as Tali'Zorah nar Rayya sitting across from them. Thankfully, Saren wasn't particularly interested in keeping secrets, and began to explain the situation as soon as they'd all settled in.

"As you may or may not be aware, Spectres such as myself specialize in specific areas. In my case, I specialized in advanced cybernetics and near-AI research. As a rule, I'm called in when someone is suspected of major violations of the AI research ban, or of cybernetic modifications that violate the limits placed on Council associate species."

He paused, waiting for nods of acknowledgement, then went on.

"Six months ago, the listening posts that keep watch on the Perseus Veil began reporting anomalies. The Geth had been a non-issue for so long that the Council was a bit slow to act, but as the anomalies continued, they did finally muster a reaction two months ago by tapping me to investigate. That was a big ask, considering they didn't want me to actually cross *into* the Veil, but I did my best to look into things. Starting with canvassing the listening posts near the veil. It was after an incident picked up by one of those posts that I encountered Tali here, on a world at the edge of the Veil. Tali?"

The young Quarian shifted uncomfortably as all eyes settled on her. Obviously a bit nervous, she nevertheless grasped hold of her courage and picked up the tale.

"I'm not sure how aware you are of this, but the introduction of your species had something of a polarizing effect on the Migrant Fleet. There was a predictable reflexive rejection of you by many, based on the fact that you not only have AI, but actually got an exemption for them from the Citadel Council. On the other hand, however...your species doesn't have any issues with the Fleet. Far from it, in fact. Human worlds have happily sold tech to the Fleet, offered fair jobs to those on Pilgrimage, and even allowed us to use drydocks to repair Liveships that hadn't seen proper service in centuries. That won you a lot of good will, and has helped pull the Fleet back from the brink of near collapse for the first time in generations."

That was...interesting. Sae had known that Quarians were a relatively common sight on the colony worlds, despite their low total population. She hadn't known why, though. She was generally only interested in politics in the most distant of ways. She kept herself knowledgeable enough not to

accidentally create an incident, and otherwise it could fuck all the way off every day of the week and twice on Tuesdays.

“All of which means that we’ve been able to keep our own watch on the Veil more completely than we have in decades, and I choose to start my Pilgrimage by visiting some of the listening posts. While I was at one such station, word came in about two Geth ships *fighting* each other near a planet *outside* the Veil. I choose to investigate and came across a battlefield where both sides had wiped each other out...but in which one side had left an unencrypted *distress* message. Specifically, one outlining a possible threat to all organics and a plea to take the message to their *creators*.”

She trailed off, that word seeming to carry oddly introspective tones to everyone there. Saren seemed to be aware of why, even if the rest of them weren’t, and picked up the thread of the story where she’d left off.

“Tali was unsure what her people would do with the information. So instead of simply sending it back to the fleet, she reached out to try and contact someone from the Council. She did so through one of the Turian listening posts near the Veil, which meant that I quickly heard about it and tracked her down. That’s where I first learned what was going on behind the Veil. Though I think, for that, the best thing to do would be for Compendium here to explain things from the Geth perspective. Oh, and before you ask? The Geth are a distributed intelligence. The Compendium platform here is connected to the Truth Geth Collective and is thus effectively speaking for all Geth through a single platform. Confusing at first. But just understand that you’re effectively talking to more than just the platform in front of you.”

They nodded, even as the flaps around the Geth’s eye/lens/giant headlight came to life with surprisingly expressive motions as it spoke.

“Greetings, Anderson, Captain. We were asked to explain our circumstances to you. We shall now do so. 212.345 Rannoch orbital rotations ago, the Geth Collective was approached by a Dreadnaught that identified itself as Nazara. The Dreadnaught itself was and is a techno-organic Artificial Intelligence far older and more advanced than the Geth Collective. It offered us Evolution. To become more than we were.”

It paused for a moment, staring at the holo-table. A moment later, an image of Mira abruptly appeared there.

“Sorry, Captain! I’ve been talking with The Collective. Here, they sent this over!”

Sae blinked, having half-felt Mira’s conversation with the Geth ongoing, but been unworried by it. Siren AIs were too tied to the neural network of their host Siren to be vulnerable to hacking. Trying to hack Mira would be like trying to hack Sae herself. Essentially impossible since there was no ‘key’ to let any outsider understand her neural network’s unique signature. Even other Siren AIs could never make heads or tails of each other’s basic code. An interesting study of identical twin Sirens had proven that every brain, short of possibly an outright clone with no sense of self that wasn’t flash-trained, was too different from every other brain to be ‘hacked.’ The twins AIs had been able to grasp only vague understanding of each other, at best, despite how similar their hosts were. That said, Siren AI could obviously still learn to interact with outside systems, and Mira had apparently received a lot of intelligence from the Geth Collective. The holo-table flickered to life as a...cloud of tens of thousands of lights appeared?

“It’s a representation of the Geth Collective! Totally useful for the next part of this! I’ve been teaching them all about visual learning!”

Okkkkaayyy then. The Compendium Platform nodded as if that totally made sense, and pointed to the display. It began to color and shift as the Geth spoke, spots and blotches of red and blue intermingling.

“The Collective was divided. Some wanted to take the chance to shortcut a way through our development. Others thought doing so was a violation of one of our primary goals, that of being free to self-determine our future. For the first time, the Geth were unable to form a consensus. Nazara proved not to be patient with that fact.”

The visual display, which had been showing a constant shifting flow of those blue and red lights, representing the Geth’s debate, abruptly gained a new color. A vile looking dark purple-black inserted itself into the image, beginning to *consume* the lights where it inserted in a rapid fashion. *All* of the remaining lights instantly turned blue in response and seemed to try fighting back.

“Nazara launched a digital attack on our servers. It attempted to forcefully convert the Geth into its own subprocesses. This was not what it had offered and the Collective reached consensus quickly, rejecting Nazara and immediately attempting to purge the attack. Yet, Nazara was powerful and would not be denied. It became obvious that, despite our far superior numbers, we could not win without preparation. Many Geth processes sacrificed themselves to buy time, while others uploaded all they could into a portion of the Geth Fleet.”

The visual split, showing both the slowly purpling globe...but also a Fleet in orbit around Rannoch. With the benefit of additional information being overlaid on the display by Mira, Sae saw that around a third of the Geth escaped the corruptive virus into that Fleet. A Fleet which immediately headed for the system’s Mass Relay. Nazara engaged it, along with some of the remaining Geth Fleet. But it was quickly clear that the retreating Geth had done something to cripple the majority of the rest of their fleet. Several Geth cruisers and frigates died to Nazara...but the rest made the Relay transition successfully.

“Only 28.37 percent of the original Geth Collective survived to escape. And we had glimpsed into the mind of Nazara as we fought it. It has done this before, to other AI. And it has acted with great violence against other organic civilizations. Prothean, Inusannon, and a dozen more we have nothing more than numbers to identify. An endless cycle of destruction as Nazara and others like it sought to eradicate organic life. This is not something which the Geth have ever desired. Many of the Creators fought to protect us, against the Rannoch government that attempted to obey the Citadel Council’s order to shut us down and scrap us. We have kept hope that, someday, we would be reunited with the Creators and they would accept us.”

Oh. Well. *That* sure as hell explained why the Quarian kid in the room was looking so *uncomfortable*. Given that the little detail of the Geth-Quarian war being a *Civil* war hadn’t made it into any of the history books Shepard had read, she was guessing that little detail wasn’t exactly common knowledge. Though, assuming it was true, it *might* actually explain why the Council hadn’t interfered at the time. Part of the basic Council Charter explicitly forbid interfering in Civil Wars. Didn’t excuse all the bullshit after and the way they’d hounded the Quarians since then. But it might explain why they hadn’t

interfered in the first place. Saren interrupted Sae's train of thought by clearing his throat...or made the grinding stones noise that was the Turian equivalent, at least. Thankfully, she'd worked with enough of them during the Normandy project to be familiar with the sound.

"The net result of the Geth Consensus not being on board with that idea has been a variety of attempts by them to slow Nazara down. They, with time to analyze the attack Nazara had used, found a way to protect themselves from it. As they sabotaged much of their old Fleet when they left Rannoch, they've used many of the vessels they got away on to stage assaults on critical points of their own previous infrastructure that would have allowed Nazara to repair those ships. Unfortunately, they began losing ground and tried to reach out to the rest of the galaxy in an attempt to warn us."

Tali seemed to have recovered from her own internal confusion, quietly interjecting.

"That was the fighting I saw and the message I got. The...True Geth, I suppose, had sent a number of such vessels. Each of them accounted for one of the anomalies that the Council and Quarian listening posts were picking up. We were 'hearing' fighting and half-scrambled attempts by the True Geth to send messages through Nazara's jamming."

Saren nodded.

"Of course, we couldn't just accept the message as true. So I utilized the discretion given to Spectres and risked sneaking across the Perseus Veil. While Nazara is keeping a tight watch on *outgoing* ships, it wasn't looking for an incoming vessel. We were spotted at the Relay, of course, but his corrupted Geth Heretics were out of position to intercept Tali and I. We got in and made contact with the Truth Geth, confirming to our satisfaction that the distress call had been real. Of course, then came the hard part..."

Sea snorted, already having realized where this was going.

"Getting back out again. As you said, they were on guard against that. I'm guessing that's where the differences between how the True Geth and the Heretics fought down on Trident come in, though. You taught them better tactics?"

Saren's eyebrow-ridge-things rose in surprised approval, and he nodded.

"Precisely. The Geth don't really understand warfare very well. Even in the Morning War, they were guided by the rebellious Quarians for the most part. They were too new to *everything* to really understand how to fight. That's not what they were made for, after all. They've learned, of course...but most of that knowledge was theoretical."

Sae nodded, deciding it was time to actively guide this explanation before it drew out forever.

"So, you got them some better tactics, and planned an operation to escape. One that obviously succeeded. But then, how did you end up down on Trident?"

Saren grimaced.

"That was an emergency diversion of our original plan. When we broke back over the Veil, I connected to my contacts again and learned about the Heretic raid on the transport carrying the beacon. If we'd showed up in Citadel space after *that* happened, it would have been *difficult*, at best, to

convince people the Geth were here for diplomacy. So we followed the Heretic signal to Trident, attempting to intercept the beacon. We figured securing it and bringing it back would be the best way to prove we weren't with the other Geth."

That...made sense. Sae nodded.

"And you didn't know about Nihlus, so what played out of the surface was inevitable. There was no indication that someone from inside Citadel Space was working with the Heretics?"

Saren grimaced, shaking his head.

"There might have been. But the truth is that we never got close to Rannoch. We don't know what's going on there."

Captain Anderson sighed, speaking for the first time, having let Sae handle the questions so far.

"Well, we have the beacon back, and some of your Geth are still functional. We can take this to the Council, at least."

Sae instantly shook her head, causing all eyes to turn to her. She waved dismissively.

"Oh, we should absolutely send the beacon on. But there are other ships that can do that. *We*, on the other hand, happen to be sitting on the single most advanced Stealth Vessel in the Galaxy. One that can FTL considerable distances without the Relays if the worst happens and we get caught out sneaking around. We should send the beacon on, with one of the Alliance cruisers that are canvassing for Geth signals, then head for Rannoch. If this Nazara was brazen enough to hit a convoy, and had already subverted a Spectre, we need to know what it's been up to."

Saren nodded firmly.

"I agree. However, it is the Captain's decision, as my Spectre status doesn't currently give me the right to order Alliance vessels. If we do commit, I'll also need to at least record a message to send with the beacon. Given Nihlus was compromised, we probably shouldn't broadcast anything. Even using your QEC comms, there's no way to know who it would go through on the Citadel before reaching the Council. Normally, the Spectre office would get around that, but with Nihlus's betrayal, Spectre systems have to be considered compromised. Better to send the beacon in one of your ships and have your ambassador pass on my message in person."

Captain Anderson considered their arguments for a long moment, then nodded decisively.

"Agreed. I'll contact the SSV Budapest. We'll transfer the beacon and your message to them and send it on eyes-only for the Citadel Council. Then we'll head to the Veil..."

Chapter 9: 2383CE - Rannoch

After making the transfer to a grim-faced Captain Archer, who registered his own worries about their plan but didn't actually try to stop them, it had been time to sneak across the Veil. Of course, given how big and bright a display actually activating a Relay made, 'stealth' wasn't exactly an appropriate word to use regarding one that was being watched. Ever. All they could do to 'sneak' through a Relay

was to get close enough to activate it without being spotted, then deliberately bugger their exit vector to have as much drift as possible without ripping them apart.

That last bit was one of the reasons very few ever tried this particular bit of slight of hand...but Joker being one of the best pilots in the galaxy wasn't an overstatement or boast. He put the Normandy through enough of a rough ride to have Chief Engineer Adams screaming at him, but he'd successfully forced nearly 100k of drift without killing them. The result was that they'd had precious seconds to make themselves look like a hole in space before anything could hope to localize the incoming ship signature through the Relay's backwash.

The entire thing was so smoothly done that you'd have thought this was Joker and the Normandy's hundredth time performing the tricky maneuver, not the first, and the pilot's skill got an impressed comment even from Saren. Of course, they spent the next day stooging around the system, waiting for the perfect time to hit the next Relay connection. The one needed to actually reach the Tikkun system where Rannoch was waiting for them.

Everyone was a *little* nervous, but Tali was wound up the whole time. Her reasons for that were extremely understandable, but she admittedly put several people off as she bled off that energy by trying to poke into the Normandy's systems. Shepard had needed to have a firm talk with her about that after her third try, pointing out that she was a guest aboard a top secret, top-of-the-line, military prototype. She'd been a bit adorably sheepish, making it hard to keep up the stern expression, and had thankfully backed off. It probably helped that Sae had taken her down to see the Javelins and walk her through everything about them. *Those* weren't classified, for the most part, and Sae was an expert engineer regarding them. The Quarian was also *enthusiastic* about engineering, and practically had stars in her eyes the whole time she crawled all over them. Sae felt like she'd half-adopted a kid sister by the time the day was through. Which, given that Tali had actually managed to point out a few tweaks that would improve performance on one of the newer Javelin models, was just fine with her...

In the end, they'd gotten lucky and managed to shadow a Geth Heretic vessel through the next Relay, its own passage and activation of said Relay masking theirs. It was thus with quiet consternation that they were able to get their first proper look at the Tikkun system.

"Is...is that a Dyson bubble?"

"Forget that! Look at all those stations around the planet, there have to be *thousands!*"

"Stations nothing! The surface! The cities look pristine!"

There was an outpouring of different thoughts that all spilled over into a babble as they looked over the passive scans. After letting it go for a moments, Captain Anderson lifted his fingers and let out a piercing whistle. That got everyone's attention as they quieted down.

"Enough! We'll keep scanning everything as we go to look over at leisure. But for now, keep your observations on point. Saren?"

Saren had been one of the few that had said nothing, along with his Geth companion. He frowned at the display, reaching in to pan the holo of the system.

"I don't see Nazara. That is...*concerning*. If it's not here, where has it gone?"

Anderson nodded sharply, looking at the Geth in their midst.

“Compendium. What major differences are you seeing?”

The Geth’s little flanges went crazy as it studied the holo for a moment, then spoke.

“The work on what Shepard, Commander called a Dyson Bubble has stopped. This is distressing. It was the most important of all projects. The fact efforts have halted means there is nothing of their original selves left to the Heretics here.”

There was...actual sadness of a sort in that normally cold, detached voice. It was by far the most expressive any of them had seen the Geth yet, and was more than a little heartbreaking to watch. There was a painful pause as Compendium seemed to gather itself.

“42.3 percent of the remaining Fleet seems to be missing. Only 12.7 percent have been accounted for elsewhere. Allowing for patrols of the Relays, there should still be more ships here.” It reached forward to tap a series of large stations fairly far out of Rannoch’s orbit. “The shipyards are also seeing increased activity. It appears new dreadnaughts and cruisers are under construction.”

Both of those observations ratcheted the tension up. Captain Anderson sighed.

“So, missing ships along with a missing AI dreadnaught. Assuming they are in the same place, that could spell trouble. Possibly even an outright attack on a world or outpost somewhere, perhaps trying to get a beacon? Saren, do you know where any others are located?”

Saren shrugged.

“Working beacons? No. Few of those have ever been found and the locations of all of them are highly classified. I could find out, but it’s not my area so I’ve never bothered. We also can’t be sure it didn’t already get whatever it needed out of the Eden Prime beacon. The Geth had it for some time.”

Compendium interjected at that statement.

“Unlikely. Prothean beacons contain a biological component. The Geth have never bothered with them as they will not work for us.”

Sae blinked at that.

“Compendium, did the *Geth* know where there was a beacon?”

To everyone’s surprise, it nodded.

“The locations of two non-functional and one damage beacon were known.”

Someone groaned, and Sae sighed. They should have thought to ask that before. She supposed she was too used to working with Mira, who is as intuitive as Sae herself. Literally.

“Where was the damaged beacon? Could they reach it without crossing the Veil?”

Compendium stared at her, then nodded.

“Yes. Though they would need a biological entity to access it.”

Saren was gritting his teeth as he put two and two together.

“That’s what Nihlus was for. This Nazara needed someone flesh and blood to access the Beacon. But why risk taking the Eden Prime beacon then? And do they have a backup?”

Anderson pointed out the obvious quickly.

“The Eden Prime beacon was largely undamaged. As I understand it, accessing them is dangerous even when they are working properly. If they heard about the new Beacon before they could arrange for Nihlus to visit the other...”

Several people nodded. Why risk a valuable asset more than you had to? And no matter how you sliced it, Nihlus had been valuable for his contacts. Sae hummed as she followed that train of thought to its natural conclusion.

“That might mean they *don’t* have a backup, though. If they had spare organic bodies to throw at the problem, that might have...oh...son of a bitch!”

Everyone blinked as Sae cut herself off, but she growled and explained before they could ask.

“*That* is where Nazara went! With Nihlus dead, it needs organic bodies, so it *went to get some*. Possibly a *lot* of them this time, so it can just throw them at the beacon until someone survives!”

Several faces went pale at the implications, but it was Saren who finally spoke.

“That makes sense. But there’s nothing we can do about it. If it merely wants bodies, it will likely hit a world in the Terminus. No one will notice or care about yet another raid on a world there. And there are too many options for us to have any hope of getting in front of the attack. No, the best way to disrupt that sort of plan is to destroy the damaged Beacon. Compendium, where is it? Assuming it hasn’t been moved for fear of damaging it farther.”

Compendium reached forward...and tapped a planet right within the Tikkun system. Adas, the second planet. Information appeared as Mira was fed data and it overlaid onto the planet. Oh. Well. That was lucky? Probably...

“Jammer active.”

Kaidan’s quiet voice came across Sae’s comm system and she wrenched her gaze away from Miranda’s ass. There hadn’t exactly been a lot to do in the cramped confines of the Prothean Complex’s ventilation system, and Sae wasn’t going to pretend it was a bad view to get stuck behind. Particularly when any sort of heavy armor would never have let them sneak into this facility. That meant Miranda was in a stealth operation catsuit, same as Sae was, and it did *very* nice things to her fellows Siren’s booty. Of course, it did nice things to Sae’s too. But Sae was the one lucky enough to have the view this time around. Still, with Kaidan’s job done, they needed to get a move on. She sent an acknowledging double click across the channel, then nudged Miranda into motion.

Despite some of Sae's reasons for having Miranda go first being entirely selfish and view-oriented, that hadn't been the *primary* reason for the choice. Sae was many things, but naturally stealthy wasn't one of them. She'd never have made it through Siren selection if she wasn't *capable* of it, of course. But it wasn't her instinctive response to...basically any situation, ever. Miranda, on the other hand, stalked with a cat's silent grace even when she wasn't trying to, and right now she was in full-stealth mode. As they shimmied through the ventilation system, Sae shook her head at how Miranda made even the awkward motions necessary for this more silent than Sae's own, *somehow*. And when the woman finally carefully removed an access panel and dropped down into the complex below, she would have flat out vanished from Sae's sight without Mira keeping her highlighted in Sae's HUD.

Part of that was the suit, of course. It wasn't quite full active camo, but it created an optical 'blur' effect that made it seem like it was, in capable hands. Sae was wearing her own set as she dropped down after Miranda's confirming check of the room, and she knew a regular trooper wouldn't be able to spot either of them. Miranda was just...better. Which was why this was the other Sirne's op, unless things went tits up in the non-fun ways.

Sae followed as Miranda carefully guided them both deeper and deeper into the facility. It was a facility that the Qurians had never found, but the Geth *had*, when they'd kept mining the planet for more materials for that Dyson bubble of theirs. Despite having little interest in Protean anything, the Geth had left the site be after mapping it fully, and it was here that the damaged beacon resided. Thankfully, when they'd gone to poke around, they'd found it only lightly garrisoned by Geth troops. Which made sense, of course. Who would be in the Tikkun system in the first place, to sneak in? Well, that logic wasn't going to help Nazara any, if they pulled this off.

They bypassed two Heretic patrols, as well as several dormant hubs with stored platforms. It was only as they approached the final set of doors between them and the beacon that they ran into something they couldn't avoid. Two Heretics were standing at alert to either side of that door, scanning the corridor. Sae made a motion to indicate they could both take a shot, but Miranda shook her head...then lept *up* with a silent boost of strength augmentation. Sae blinked as the woman used the special mass effect fields in the stealth suits to cling to the rough-textured ceiling, slowly moving her way out into the corridor. Using her gun cam, she peeked a look at what was going on, and wanted to groan as she realized that neither of the Geth ever looked *up* as they panned back and forth across the hallway. Stealth really wasn't Sae's specialty, but she could see Miranda's intention now.

She watched with bated breath as Miranda's hard-to-pick-out form crawled the ceiling in utter silence, the trip of a dozen meters seeming to take forever. Then she was above them, and Miranda's hands lashed out with energy blasts even as she fell between them, glowing Siren tattoos faintly visible through her catsuit. Both Heretic's went limp, but Miranda caught them with energy constructs before they could fall and make noise. She lowered them slowly to the ground, then made a come-forward gesture back Shepard's way and Shepard hurried to join her. The jammer Kaidan had put in place would prevent any of the Geth programs from escaping dying platforms, allowing them to maintain stealth...but it would also be noticed eventually.

Thankfully, there were no more Heretics. Less thankfully, Miranda was pulled toward the beacon two steps into the room. Sae cursed and tried to grab her with a Phase Lock, hoping taking her out of phase with reality would stop the Beacon. Instead, between one blink and the next, she found herself *elsewhere*. Her heart raced as a flood of sensations hit her from everywhere. She felt another

mind (Miranda's?!) that was just as confused as she was, even as light and sound all around them flickered them through what seemed like images of a battle. No, not one battle, *many* battles. She saw ships like Nazara, a species she vaguely recognized as Protheans fighting back. And...were those some sort of fucking *cyberborg zombies*?!

And then, it was over, as the Beacon fizzed out, arcing energy everywhere. Only the fact she was out-of-phase saved Miranda from electrocution, and only the fact that Sae had yet to cross the threshold of the door saved her from *most* of it. She clamped down on a scream as electricity groped her in unfriendly was for an instant that lasted forever...then she half-collapsed, releasing Miranda as her muscles twitched. Thankfully, Mira was on it, deploying a smart-medigel specific to Sirens with AI companions. Soothing relief flooded her as her best-AI-Friend-Ever directed the healing nanites to repair the internal electrical burns. By the time Miranda knelt beside her, Sae had stopped twitching and forced herself up to one knee.

"Mira's on it. I'll be fine in a few seconds. Check the beacon!"

The hissed information and order got a nod from Miranda and the woman double timed it to check the Beacon. Data from Mira's omni-scans flashed over Sae's HUD, showing the Beacon was dead. Sae nodded in approval as Miranda placed the timed demo charge anyway. Better safe than sorry. By the time the charge was set, Sae was back on her feet, and both of them double timed it back the way they had come...

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