

Aftermath

Sleep was a familiar place, like a warm blanket it comforted Drake in between the bouts of cold steel and blood; desperate battles fought in the deep regions of space. Sometimes it was hard for him to tell which part was the dream, and which part was real. Some others secretly hoped that the horrors of war they faced every time they woke up was really the nightmare, and that they would someday awaken from this estranged dream scape.

Drake was dreaming, as he often does. His sleep was rarely restful. His dreams were always the same. Faces of friends, brothers in arms, comrades and innocents alike killed in battle, through war that was as unforgiving as the space they traversed to get there.

The implants of a Delta-4 don't easily lend one to sleeping soundly. The voices of the real world collided with the echoes of the dream world. It is no surprise that many of the Delta-4's over time went through bouts of mild psychosis, or full on insanity as their perceptions of reality became skewed, and often nightmarish as they blended with the horrors of war. This is why only the most intelligent and strongest willed volunteers were even ever considered for the Delta project.

The faces of the dead, the ghosts of war were reaching out for Drake. He was not afraid, for he knew all too well that he would someday join them in their cacophony. He could hear his name being echoed amongst them...

"Drake."

"Lieutenant!"

Drake's eyes snapped open, adjusting quickly to the dim light of the debriefing room, specially suited for acclimating those fresh out of stasis sleep. The lights would increase in almost imperceptible increments until his eyes were fully adjusted to the regular ship lighting.

The room was fairly nondescript, plain except for the maps and planning boards behind the podium on the dais at the far end of the room. Stadium seating about 5 rows deep wrapped around an array of glass panels in both the floor and ceiling, a holoprojector used to detail battle plans and other plans of action, often over or around 3d representations of the planets or cities they were about to descend upon.

The room felt oddly empty, almost ghostlike. It wasn't very long ago, at least to Drake, that this room held mission planning sessions and various debriefings for a hodgepodge of non-coms, officers, and Delta-4's. Most of them were gone now, either dead or missing. A lucky few got to go home from their injuries, though to them luck was a relative term.

Drake was not immediately aware that there was someone else in the room, and that someone in the room had indeed called his name. He was not immediately aware of the man standing off to his left. After a moment he slowly looked up and over at the man. Their gazes locked for a moment, and Drake quickly moved to stand, but the man waved his hand at the attempt.

"That's not necessary son." The admiral chuckled in his scratchy baritone that was all too familiar over fleet comms. The Admiral carefully took a seat next to Drake, fully aware that the young Delta-4 was still disoriented.

"You sure gave them orderlies a thrashing." The admiral was wearing a smile by this point, something that he rarely had the heart or time to do these days. Drake opened his mouth to defend himself, but the admiral was already shaking his head. He placed a hand on Drake's shoulder. "Don't worry about it son, the only one that was seriously hurt was the one that needed to be."

"Where are we, I mean, the ship, sir." Drake's words fell with an unusual uncertainty. He already knew the answer to his question, but he needed to hear it.

"Earth."

"I...", Drake stopped, unsure of exactly what to say. He knew where he was, but the thing he couldn't understand was how, or why. The last thing he remembered before waking up from stasis sleep was snapping the neck of a Shivan on the lunar preparatory invasions around the moons of the Shivan home world.

"I, don't remember." Drake seemed rather uneasy about his confession.

"I am not surprised, son." The Admiral replied with a bit of sadness in his voice. "You were hurt pretty badly on them Shivan moons." The Admiral gave him a moment to consider what he just said. He knows that Drake knows more than he likely remembers. Drake was lying in the infirmary on the hospital ship Mercy in orbit around Shiva Prime when the invasion started. Drake's ceaseless screaming only vaguely echoed the slaughter of entire battalions of his brothers in arms planet side. Sometimes the empathic abilities of a Delta-4 did not work in their favor.

"It's probably a good thing you don't." The Admiral paused for a moment as he exhaled a long and sorrowful breath. He closed his eyes for just a moment before he spoke, the words just as painful as the memory.

"We expected a swift victory when we made planet fall. Instead it turned out quite more bloody and drawn out than we had intended, or expected." The Admiral tried to fight back the tears, the memories of hundreds of young men screaming over fleet comms before they were slaughtered by the defending Shivans. Frightened cries for help went unanswered as the fleet above was helpless to help. Even the air support was being swatted like flies.

"We lost eighty percent of our ground forces in about 3 months of fighting, and nearly all of our air support. Half of what remained were either injured, or infected."

Shivan infection was not, for all intents and purposes, an actual infection. Shivans are a highly psychic race. They are extremely effective fighters because they are able to feel their enemy before the enemy sees them, and often know what the enemy is going to do before he does. Then, they have the added bonus of extremely coherent, seemingly precognitive and efficient combat maneuvers. However, the most frightening ability of a Shivan is the ability to take control of an enemy, and forcefully bring him into the hive mind, effectively turning the enemy to fight for you. There are horror stories of Platoons being destroyed from within as one half turned against the other.

Luckily, the latter tactic was not one frequently used. One can only assume it was rather taxing to the controller. The impact on troop morale was far more effective.

"We ended up glassing the planet from orbit."

Glassing was a polite way saying you 'nuked it from orbit.' A large scale thermonuclear bombardment was a spectacle to behold from orbit, but rarely was it a pleasant thing for those on the ground.

"I don't know why we didn't do it in the first place." The Admiral had a momentary flash of anger, but resigned himself to the futility of being angry so far after the fact. "Damned yuppies back on earth were calling it genocide, so we sent troops in instead." The Admiral shook his head. "I bet they wish they listened now."

"I have no idea how many of our own sons and fathers we entombed, and reduced to ash back on Shiva Prime. We didn't have time to pull everyone out. I mean..." The Admiral paused again. It seemed as if he was arguing silently to himself, perhaps trying to reassure himself of what had been done.

"We won the war, but at what cost." The Admiral had a defeated look on his face. He took the loss of every man and woman under his command personally, and Drake knew this.

"I am sure you did everything you could." Drake placed a hand on the Admiral's shoulder. The whole moment was surreal. The Admiral had been more of a father figure to him since he entered the war. The Admiral had always been an anchor in the war effort, his commanding presence and stern demeanor helping to keep the lines together in even the most trying of circumstances. Now, here he was, on the verge of tears, leaning on a subordinate for support. Of course, unknown to Drake, as much as he regarded the Admiral a father figure, so did the Admiral regard him as a son.

The Admiral nodded. "Well, here we are then." He looked up at Drake and tried to force a smile. "At least we got you home in one piece."

"What happened to the others?"

"The Delta-4s?"

For some reason the question surprised the Admiral, but he should have expected it. They all trained together, and many of them died together. "Well, son, besides you, there are only 3 others left alive after the debacle on the Shivan home world." The Admiral wasn't sure how Drake would take the news. "One's in a coma, and the other two are in a psych ward."

"I see." Drake sighed heavily. He had been hoping for at least a little good news. "That means..."

"You are the last Delta-4." The Admiral finished his sentence, knowing what was on his mind. The Delta-4's were instrumental in the victory against the Shivans. They were specially trained and psynetically engineered soldiers created to fight specifically against the

Shivans. Using captured Shivan specimens, as well as Shivan technology, scientists developed psionically tuned bionic and cybernetic implants, or psynectics, as it was coined by the brass. These implants allowed the imbued soldier possession of abilities similar to those of the Shivans, with some unforeseen additional abilities, such as the ability to read surface thoughts. They were instrumental in organizing large bodies of soldiers, in concert with other Delta-4s, to fight against and counter the movements of the Shivans.

The psynetic implants in addition to standard bionic and cybernetic systems also made the Delta-4s faster and stronger. Combined with their almost precognitive fighting ability, this made them a serious threat to everyone they came up against, Shivan and non-Shivan alike.

It were the non-Shivan encounters that made them rather infamous and unpopular back home on Earth.

Drake was the last of the Delta-4s. A military legacy that would go down in the history books as tyrants, and demigods on the battlefield. They would also go down as murderers. This was a development that Drake was not yet aware of. For while Drake was expecting some kind of hero's welcome, being the last of his kind, the prodigal sons of a forgotten war, he was in for a rude awakening.