

The Compound

“Can you tell us what we’re seeing here, Colonel Trask?”

“This is the Phase One protocol, ‘Mam. The team is using thermal and near-infrared illumination drones to obtain visual intelligence and positioning prior to sending in Alpha Unit.”

“This is a live feed then?”

“Affirmative, ‘mam.”

“Are they seeing the same thing in Virginia?”

“Essentially. We control the video transmission from here, so there is a slight delay.”

“Excuse me for interrupting, Colonel.”

“Not at all, sir.”

“I’m going to get myself a cup of coffee. This has been a long night. If I have to listen to one more phrase of military jargon and stare at any more little blobs and flashes of light moving around on a screen without some caffeine in me, I’m going to lose it. You want one, Linda?”

“Sure, Pete. Thanks. Black, please”

“Colonel?”

“No thank you, sir.”

“Please, call me Pete.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So as you were saying, Colonel, about the drones?”

“Yes, ‘mam. They are highly effective for this type of operation. Stealthy, virtually undetectable. We can scan an area from miles away before putting boots on the ground.”

“How many miles?”

“In good weather conditions - about 10 clicks – approximately 6 miles.”

“Here’s your coffee, Linda. I’ll be happy when we’re about 500 clicks from this place, Colonel.”

“It won’t be much longer, sir.”

“Linda, I don’t like that you’ve put yourself in danger by insisting on observing this operation in the live zone. We could have easily done this from Virginia.”

“Pete, I’ve never been in combat. If I’m going to be running the goddamn free world don’t you think I should at least gain some real world knowledge and have a professional vocabulary? Colonel, don’t you agree?”

“Affirmative, ‘mam.”

“Well, you’re certainly getting the vocabulary, courtesy of the colonel. But I still don’t like the risk.”

“You are being such a worry-wart, Pete. I can hardly believe you were ever in the Marines.”

“When I was serving, we had to look ‘em in the eyes, Linda.”

“Oh, please. You served in Desert Storm – they even called it the Video Game War.”

“That’s right, ‘mam. Cameras were attached to the bombers and the footage was relayed to the media after each strike for them to broadcast.”

“Well, you have learned a lot, Linda. But I was part of the ground assault, not the initial bombardment.”

“Be that as it may, my point is that we are perfectly safe. There are troops and guards all around the compound. Isn’t that correct, Colonel?”

“Yes, ‘mam. Expertly trained personnel all willing to sacrifice themselves for you and the Secretary.”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary, Colonel Trask. Please tell me some more about this technology.”

“In addition to obtaining the visual intelligence you see here on the screen, the drone is also sprinkling the area with PIXIE DUST.”

“Pixie dust? That doesn’t sound very technical.”

"It's an acronym, sir. It stands for Peripheral Interim Excisable Interlay Entrance with Dynamic Underlay Strategic Trapping. It's nano-technology smaller than grains of pollen that stick to whatever it touches just like pollen. It allows us to create a virtual grid that maps the area in real time. The Alpha Unit team can follow it precisely, and obtain the exact positioning of hot and cold targets, further reducing the possibility of collateral loss."

"Amazing. It's like a trail of bread crumbs."

"Exactly, 'mam."

"How long have you been with Strategic Protection and Defense, Colonel?"

"Four years this June, sir."

"You're not going to call me Pete, are you, Colonel?"

"No, sir. I hope you understand."

"I do, Trask. Which is exactly why I left the military and went back to civilian life. Too much formality for me."

"I understand, sir."

"Do you, really?"

"No, sir."

"I can sense that."

"Can I speak freely, sir?"

"Of course."

"I don't think it behooves one to enter military life and not continue in its service."

"Why is that?"

"There is so much that can be accomplished for the greater good. Much more than serving in politics, I believe."

"Colonel, tell me. How many tours of active duty have you served?"

"Four. Not including my current assignment."

"So about 10 years, correct?"

“Approximately, yes.”

“And you’ve never once considered returning to civilian life?”

“No, sir.”

“Never thought about chucking it all, going home to Mom and Dad, family? A girl – or maybe a guy? I don’t want to be presumptuous.”

“Pete!”

“Of course not, sir. And no. There was a girl at one point, but there’s no family to speak of.”

“So you’re kind of a lone wolf. You’re a bit of a rebel, aren’t you?”

“I might say I am, sir.”

“You might say it? Or you would say it?”

“Pete! Do you hear yourself? Leave him be. I’m sorry, Colonel Trask. The Secretary is tired and forgetting his manners. The Colonel is our host and I think you’re getting a little too personal.”

“Excuse me, Linda. But I think it’s important to know a little bit about the man who is responsible for protecting our lives at the moment. We’re observing a highly classified military strike, not watching the playoffs at Walt’s Wild Wings. Things can go wrong – quickly.”

“Now, Pete. You know how much I regard your opinion on all kinds of matters but there is no reason to be antagonistic. Things are going just beautifully, if you can actually say that about this type of thing. Just look at what is happening before our very eyes. It’s fascinating.”

“I agree, ‘mam. And I would say there is a kind of beauty to a military action. “

“Wow. Now we are getting to know one another. Please expand on that, Colonel.”

“Yes, sir. I mean that there is a kind of grace, symmetry and precision to the successful execution of a military mission; a beauty to it.”

“How so?”

“Well, for example, observe the screen on the left. You will see that the Alpha One unit advance team has now entered into the hot zone - that’s the compound we are

targeting, 'mam. Prior to taking out the main targets, the peripheral targets guarding them must be neutralized. These targets are indicated by their red thermal thumbprints created by the PIXIE DUST. They are being effectively eliminated without causing any disturbance. No alarm has been sounded. We are steps closer to achieving our main targets and they are none the wiser."

"About the targets, Colonel? I've been briefed on the criteria that were used and seen their dossiers but how long does it generally take to set up a field operation like this one?"

"Well, that depends, 'mam. Until recently, the targets were in securely defended positions in a sheltered territory and therefore unattainable. Security was too high to safely carry out the mission. However, the targets have been on the kill list for a long time and are well known enemies of the cause - excuse me - the State. Once they moved and were isolated, we were able to put together a plan pretty quickly. We have quite a bit of resources at our disposal."

"Interesting. I wonder why they moved to where they were unsafe."

"I don't know, 'mam - over confidence, perhaps. Or just lack of judgment. It can happen to anyone."

"Thank you, Trask, for that insight. You know, Linda, I could use another cup of joe. How about you?"

"I'm okay, Pete. I- "

"Colonel Trask, Linda looks beat and I'm just worn out. Would you mind getting us some refills? Here's our cups. Please. You don't mind do you?"

"No, sir. Not at all."

"Thanks, Trask."

"Linda, there is something about this guy I don't like."

"Pete, you're paranoid."

"Maybe, but I'm going to reach out to Central Intelligence right now. I can't put my finger on it but something is not right."

"Oh, Pete! You are being ridiculous."

"Shhhh. He's coming back. Just act normal. Damn, my phone isn't working. Let me see yours. Thanks. Ask him some more questions."

“Thank you, Colonel.”

“You’re welcome. The coffee is pretty hot, ‘mam. Watch your tongue on that.”

“Sure. Why don’t you continue describing what’s happening for us.”

“Certainly. As you can see the advance units have entered the building and are approaching the area where the targets are located.”

“Well, I did see but now it looks like they’ve disappeared.”

“Yes, good observation. The stairwells in the building are lined with a conductive material so we’re not getting a clear reading. That makes it the most dangerous part of the mission. The units on the ground are relying on their own eyes and ears to advance. If all goes well, you’ll see them again when they pop out on the target floor.”

“Colonel, is there any reason our phones would not be operating? I understood we would not lose access here.”

“I can’t say, sir. All the equipment seems to be functioning properly.”

“Colonel!”

“Yes, ‘mam?”

“I see them again! They’ve popped out just as you said. Are those the targets in that room down the hall?”

“Yes, ‘mam.”

“Hmm. I see them! But what are those two small circles between them? There’s a vapor coming off of them.”

“That would be two cups of hot coffee, ‘mam.”

“Oh my god, Pete!”

“Trask, you son-of-a-bitch.”

“Yes, sir. A thing of beauty.”