

Unmanned

Press the button, someone dies. That's not how they sold the job to me, but that's what it is. They put me here because I'm smart so it didn't take me long to figure out what the job really is. They put me here, but they didn't force me. I chose this. Press the button, someone dies.

My box is windowless. Five by five. It smells of sweat and it's kept dark so I can see my screens better. Six screens, a keyboard, a joystick. The temperature is carefully controlled, always the same. The box is filled with the constant humming of this brain at work; I don't hear it so much as feel it coursing through me.

The screens are infrared. I hardly notice now. My dreams are infrared. I watch them, the threat. Far off in their foreign country, but right here in my box with me. And not so foreign. I see them living their lives, spending time with their families, caring for their animals. At night my screens show a sky scattered with red glowing stars. Not stars though, not really. Warm bodies show red, warm bodies all across the city sleeping on their roofs to escape the inescapable heat. Sometimes two red stars join, become one as I watch. The threat.

My co-pilots are in their boxes with their screens and their body odors. So they can push their buttons. So someone can die. We are just gears in the machine. Don't think about it. Don't talk about it. Push the button.

Six screens, six homes, six families. Screen two flashes red- Target B397. I've been monitoring this one for three weeks now. Awaiting confirmation that this is indeed a true threat. My headset turns on, tells me to prepare to deploy. I switch my set over, "Set crosshairs on Target B397," I tell one of my co-pilots in their humming box. I watch the crosshairs appear on screen two. I scan the infrared one last time, "Sending Pain and his brother Glory," I tell the headset and pull the trigger on my joystick. *Joystick.*

Twenty seconds. Slow motion as Pain and Glory streak through those far away skies, ejected from their unmanned aircraft. Unmanned? I am a man.

Ten seconds. My eyes dry and burning, fixed to the screen. A tiny figure comes around from behind the target, inside the crosshairs. I lean in, "Is that a kid?" I ask my headset, ask anyone. I still have a five second window to divert Pain and Glory. "Diverting missile."

"Do not divert missile. I repeat, do not divert missile." My fingers freeze on the keyboard. The humming fills my body; I feel sweat trace a slow path from my hairline to my collar. The screen flashes green; the figure is gone. Bile rises in my throat, "Did we just kill a kid?"

"Negative. Just a goat."

Goats have four legs.

Don't think about it. Don't talk about it.

I can pace the length of my five foot box. I can pace the square footage not taken up by monitors and keyboards. I can exit at request to use the restroom. I pace. Check the screens. Pace. My boots feel leaden; my feet lost inside the heavy casings. Government Issued Boots. Government Issued Pants. Belt. Shirt. Undershirt. Underwear. Socks. Haircut. I feel the panic rising, the bile again. I can't feel my body inside these clothes. I'm shrunken. Lost. I press the restroom call button and receive a green light. I hear my door unlock with a click and step out into more darkness. A hallway lined with doors to my co-pilots' boxes. One door at the end of the hall is lit with a dim sign marked RESTROOMS another marked SLEEPING QUARTERS. We take our Government Issued Meals in our rooms. We are let off of our inner shifts at staggered intervals. I've only ever met the co-pilots who end or begin their outer shift at the same time as me. Outer shifts start when we are called from the outer world to our box and end

when we are released back to the outer world. Sometimes days, sometimes weeks. Inner shifts are when we are allowed to leave our boxes and head to our sleeping quarters.

When I do leave, it's really no different. I sit in my small apartment. Alone. I sit in front of a screen, play video games, drink beers. A remote control glued to my hand instead of joystick. Animation instead of infrared. Beer. But still, push the button, someone dies. If I try to go out- to the grocery store, a bar- I stop being able to see people's faces. They all just become red dots. Warm bodies. Targets. So I go back to my apartment and do what I know to do. Push the button, someone dies.

I walk through the door marked RESTROOMS. The light is brighter in here, not much, but it still hurts my eyes. I hear the door lock behind me. I race to the toilet and vomit, my eyes tearing at the burn. I wipe my face on my sleeve and stand, stagger to the sink. The panic's still there squeezing my heart, my lungs. I can't breathe. I lean in to the mirror. Government Issued Haircut. "You are Thomas Cahill. You used to fish. You used to play soccer. You love peanut butter anything," my voice is shaking as I watch my own face in the mirror, "You used to love helping your mom cook dinners. You..." my eyes unlock from my reflection, trail down my uniformed body. Government Issued Boots. Government Issued Pants. "You are a killing machine." Government Issued Thoughts. My fingers tear at my laces, my belt, the buttons down the front of my shirt. I stand panting and naked- look back at the mirror. I don't recognize my pale body. I drop to my knees, grit my teeth, squeeze my fingernails into the palms of my hands. I want to scream but they'll hear me. I crumple to the floor, pull my knees to my chest. The cold of the linoleum against my skin is simple and undeniable. It helps me to slow my breathing and swallow the panic. I stay there, shivering, until the sound of the red buzzer drills into my head, demands my return to my box.

Tonight I sleep in my uniform to keep the panic at bay, to stay numb. I even leave my boots on, hanging heavy and awkward off the end of my cot. No matter how long my inner is or how tired I am, my eyes

dry and burning, it's always hard to sleep. No wonder this job is so unpopular. You're bright, the recruiters stroke you with their lies and compliments, motivated, talented, a quick learner. You'll be a war hero.

But it's coward that the outside soldiers call us. Button-pushers.

When I close my eyes I see the constellations of warm red dots on the backs of my eyelids. Shifting, floating, two slowly merging into one. The warmth and simplicity are intoxicating. Then a sudden blinding flash of green, the red dots obliterated, color draining quickly from them as the warmth of life does. My eyes fly open.

Coward. Button-pusher.

When I do finally sleep my nightmares are in infrared.

Morning comes. Signaled not by the rising of the sun but by the persistent red buzzer over my cot and a tray of Government Issued Food slid through the slot in my door. I take two bites of the luke-warm oatmeal and finish the coffee. The panic is gone, leaving me empty.

Don't think about it. Don't talk about it.

I press the green release request button and the lock clicks open. I head to the restroom and then to my box. I stand in the five by five foot dimness and look over the bulletin boards on my wall. Rows of faces, not infrared, photographs. The threat. The ones considered Ultimate Targets.

"Which motherfucker's gonna die today?"

I hear myself ask that. I really hear myself ask that. Immediately the bile taste is back in my throat, my mouth. I thank God no one can hear me. Or can they? "I am Thomas Cahill," I tell myself.

I sit at the screens, monitoring. Watching so closely from so far away. Their lives go on in front of me. Do they know Pain and his brother Glory await them? That the unmanned aircraft are never far, even if the men are? If they were truly unmanned they would be nothing. Pain and Glory nothing but sleek shining metal.

I watch. I push the button. Coward.

I watch. I set the crosshairs. Killing machine.

I watch. I taste the bile. Plenty of motherfuckers dying today.

Button-pusher. Coward.

I don't know how much time passes until I'm informed that my outer shift is completed. My feet are lost again but my boots carry me to the Outer Door. My hand slides the keycard and the door clicks open. It's daylight and the sun stabs deep into my eye sockets. Everything is hot and still and bright, sand blowing gently.

My boots carry me into the quiet outside world. Toward the shimmering waves of heat, rising to distort my vision. Adding a level of surrealism to the miles of desert stretching ahead of me. I hardly feel the heat, feel anything, as I walk heavily on. Coward. I am coated head to foot in dust, every particle of me feels dried out, an empty husk. Button-pusher. Finally I can see the lip of the canyon with its sweeping views of sandstone cliffs. I am a killing machine. I step to the edge of the canyon, pulsing with heat and a deep silence.

Unman the unmanned aircraft.