

CRATERS

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

What they don't tell you when you sign up is that the work takes a certain amount of trust. The driver, head covered by a half-assed turban, smiles a little too much, and when he yes ma'ams you and no ma'ams you, you can be lulled into thinking he actually works for you.

Then he opens the side door of his rusted jeep and nods at the dirt-covered seat. You don't even hesitate as you slide in, backpack filled with water bottles and purifying pills, vitamins and six day's dry rations.

You sit in that jeep, and you're grateful, because you never allow yourself to think that he could be one of them, taking you to some roadside bunker, getting paid an advance cut of the ransom they anticipate. Or worse, getting paid to leave you there so that they can all take turns until you're bleeding and catatonic and don't care when they put the fifty-year-old pistol to your head.

You can't think about the risks, not as you're getting in that jeep, or letting some so-called civilian lead you down sunlit streets that have seen war for centuries almost non-stop.

You trust, because if you don't you can't do your job.

You trust, and hope you get away from this place before your luck runs out.

* * * *

I still have luck. I know it because today we pull into the camp. This camp's just like all the others I've seen in my twenty-year career. The ass-end of nowhere, damn near unbearable heat. Barbed wire, older than God, fences in everything, and at the front, soldiers with some kind of high tech rifle, some sort of programmable thing I don't understand.

My driver pulls into a long line of oil-burning cars, their engines only partly modified to hydrogen. The air stinks of gasoline, a smell I associate with my childhood, not with now.

We sit in the heat. Sweat pours down my face. I nurse the bottle of water I brought from the Green Zone—a misnomer we've applied to the American base in every "war" since Iraq. The Green Zone doesn't have a lick of green in it. It just has buildings that are theoretically protected from bombs and suicide attacks.

Finally, we pull up to the checkpoint. I clutch my bag against my lap, even though the canvas is heavy and hot.

My driver knows the soldiers. “Reporter lady,” he tells them in English. The English is for my benefit, to prove once again that he is my friend. I haven’t let him know that I know parts (the dirty parts mostly) of two dozen languages. “Very famous. She blog, she do vid, you see her on CNN, no?”

The soldiers lean in. They have young faces covered in sand and mud and three-day-old beards. The same faces I’ve been seeing for years—skin an indeterminate color, thanks to the sun and the dirt, eyes black or brown or covered with shades, expressions flat—the youth visible only in the body shape, the lack of wrinkles and sunlines, the leftover curiosity undimmed by too much death over too much time.

I lean forward so they can see my face. They don’t recognize me. CNN pays me, just like the *New York Times News Service*, just like the Voice of the European Union. But none of them broadcast or replicate my image.

The woman everyone thinks of as me is a hired face, whose features get digitized over mine before anything goes out into public. Too many murdered journalists. Too many famous targets.

The military brass, they know to scan my wrist, send the code into the Reporter Registry, and get the retinal download that they can double-check against my eye. But foot soldiers, here on crap duty, they don’t know for nothing.

So they eyeball me, expecting a pretty face—all the studio hires are skinny and gorgeous—and instead, getting my shoe-leather skin, my dishwasher blond going on steel gray hair, and my seen-too-much eyes. They take in the sweat and the khakis and the pinkie jacks that look like plastic fingernails.

I wait.

They don’t even confer. The guy in charge waves the jeep forward, figuring, I guess, that I clean up startlingly well. Before I can say anything, the jeep roars through the barbed wire into a wide flat street filled with people.

Most cultures call them refugees, but I think of them as the dregs—unwanted and unlucky, thrown from country to country, or locked away in undesirable land, waiting for a bit of charity, a change of political fortune, waiting for an understanding that will never, ever come.

* * * *

The smell hits you first: raw sewage combined with vomit and dysentery. Then the bugs, bugs like you've never seen, moving in swarms, sensing fresh meat.

After your first time with those swarms, you slather illegal bug spray on your arms, not caring that developed countries banned DDT as a poison/nerve toxin long ago. Anything to keep those creatures off you, anything to keep yourself alive.

You get out of your jeep, and immediately, the children who aren't dying surround you. They don't want sweets— what a quaint old idea that is—they want to know what kind of tech you have, what's buried in your skin, what you carry under your eyes, what you record from that hollow under your chin. You give them short answers, wrong answers, answers you'll regret in the quiet of your hotel room days later, after you know you've made it out to report once more. You remember them, wonder how they'll do, hope that they won't become the ones you see farther into the camp, sprawled outside thin government-issue tents, those bug swarms covering their faces, their stomachs distended, their limbs pieces of scrap so thin that they don't even look like useful sticks.

Then you set the memories—the knowledge—aside. You're good at setting things aside. That's a skill you acquire in this job, if you didn't already have it when you came in. The I'll-think-about-it-later skill, a promise to the self that is never fulfilled.

Because if you do think about it later, you get overwhelmed. You figure out pretty damn quickly that if you do think about all the things you've seen—all the broken bodies, all the dying children—you'll break, and if you break you won't be able to work, and if you can't work, you can no longer be.

After a while, work is all that's left to you. Between the misplaced trust and the sights no human should have to bear, you stand, reporting, because you believe someone will care, someone stronger will Do Something.

Even though, deep down, you know, there is no one stronger, and nothing ever gets done.

* * * *

5:15 PM Upload: **Suicide Squadron Part I** by Martha Trumante

General Amanda Pedersen tells the story as if it happened two days ago instead of twenty years ago. She's sitting in one of the many cafeterias in the Louvre, this one just beneath the glass pyramid where the tourists enter. She's an American soldier on leave, spending a week with her student boyfriend at the Sorbonne. He has classes. She's seeing the sights.

She's just resting her feet, propping them up— American-style—on the

plastic chair across from her. From her vantage, she can't see the first round of security in the pyramid itself, but she can see the second set of metal detectors, the ones installed after the simultaneous attacks of '19 that leveled half the Prado in Madrid and the Tate in London.

She likes watching security systems—that's what got her to enlist in the first place, guaranteeing a sense of security in an insecure world—and she likes watching people go through them.

The little boy and his mother are alone on the escalator coming down. They reach the security desk, the woman opening her palm to reveal the number embedded under the skin, her son—maybe four, maybe five—bouncing with excitement beside her.

A guard approaches him, says something, and the boy extends his arms—European, clearly, used to high levels of security. The guard runs his wand up the boy's legs, over his crotch, in front of his chest—

And the world collapses.

Thais how she describes it. The world collapses. The air smells of blood and smoke and falling plaster. Her skin is covered in dust and goo and she has to pull some kind of stone off her legs. Miraculously, they're not broken, but as the day progresses, part of her wishes they were, so she wouldn't be carrying dead through the ruins of the Roman area, up the back stairs, and into the thin Paris sunlight.

She can't go to the rebuilt pyramid, even now, nor to the Touleries Garden or even look at the Seine without thinking of that little boy, the smile on his face as he bounces, anticipating a day in the museum, a day with his mother, a day without cares, like five-year-olds are supposed to have.

Were supposed to have.

Before everything changed.

* * * *

The driver has left me. He will be back in two days, he says, waiting for me near the checkpoint, but I do not believe him. My trust only goes so far, and I will not pay him in advance for the privilege of ferrying me out of this place. So he will forget, or die, or think I have forgotten, or died, whatever eases his conscience if a shred of his conscience still remains.

I walk deep into the camp, my pack slung over my shoulder. My easy walk, my relatively clean clothing, and my pack mark me as a newcomer, as someone who

doesn't belong.

The heat is oppressive. There's no place out of the sun except the tents the Red Cross and its relative out here, the Red Crescent, have put up. People sit outside those tents, some clutching babies, other supervising children who dig in the dirt.

Rivulets of mud run across the path. Judging by the flies and the smell, the mud isn't made by water. It's overflowing sewage, or maybe it's urine from the lack of a good latrine system or maybe it's blood.

There's a lot of blood here.

I do no Miming, record no images. The Western world has seen these places before, countless times. When I was a child, late-night television had infomercials featuring cheerful men who walked through such places with a single well-dressed child, selling some religious charity that purported to help people.

Charities don't help people here. They merely stem the tide, stop the preventable deaths, keep the worst diseases at bay. But they don't find real homes for these people, don't do job training, don't offer language lessons, and more importantly, don't settle the political crises or the wars that cause the problems in the first place.

The aide worker has a harder job than I do, because the aide worker—the real aide worker—goes from country to country from camp to camp from crisis to crisis, knowing that for each life saved a thousand more will be lost.

I prefer my work, focused as it can be.

I have been on this assignment for six months now. Writing side pieces. Blogging about the bigger events. Uploading pieces that give no hint of my actual purpose.

My editors fear it will make me a target.

I know that I already am.

* * * *

Whoever called these places camps had a gift for euphemism. These are villages, small towns with a complete and evolved social system.

You learn that early, in your first camp, when you ask the wrong person the wrong question. Yes, violence is common here—it's common in any human enclave—but it is also a means of crowd control.

Usually you have nothing to do with the extended social system. Usually you speak to the camp leaders—not the official leaders, assigned by the occupying power (whoever that may be), but the de facto leaders, the ones who ask for extra water, who discipline the teenagers who steal hydrogen from truck tanks, who kill the occasional criminal (as an example, always as an example).

You speak to these leaders, and then you leave, returning to the dumpy hotel in the dumpy (and often bombed-out) city, and lie on the shallow mattress behind the thin wooden door, and thank whatever god you know that you have a job, that your employer pays the maximum amount to ensure your safety, that you are not the people you visited that afternoon.

But sometimes, you must venture deep into the enclave, negotiate the social strata without any kind of assistance. You guess which tents are the tents of the privileged (the ones up front, nearest the food?), which tents are the tents of the hopelessly impoverished (in the middle, where the mud runs deep and the smells overwhelm?), and which tents belong to the outcasts, the ones no one speaks to, the ones that make you unclean when you speak to them.

Never assume they're the tents farthest away from the entrance. Never assume they're the ones nearest the collapsing latrines.

Never assume.

Watch, instead. Watch to see which areas the adults avoid, which parts the parents grab their children away from in complete and utter panic.

Watch.

It is the only way you'll survive.

* * * *

The people I have come to see live in a row near the back of the medical tent. The medical tent has open sides to welcome easy cases, and a smaller, air-conditioned tent further inside the main one for difficult cases. There is no marking on the main tent—no garish red cross or scythe-like red crescent. No initials for Doctors Without Borders, no flag from some sympathetic and neutral country.

Just a medical tent, which leads me to believe this camp is so unimportant that only representatives from the various charitable organizations come here. Only a few people even know how bad things are here, are willing to see what I can see.

Even though I will not report it.

I'm here for this group within the camp, an enclave within the enclave. I must visit them and leave. I have, maybe, eight hours here—seven hours of talk, and one hour to get away.

I'm aware that when I'm through, I may not be able to find a ride close to the camp. I must trust again or I must walk.

Neither is a good option.

The tents in this enclave are surprisingly clean. I suspect these people take what they need and no one argues with them. No children lie outside the flaps covered in bugs. No children have distended stomachs or too thin limbs.

But the parents have that hollow-eyed look. The one that comes when the illusions are gone, the one that comes to people who have decided their god has either asked too much of them or has abandoned them.

I stand outside the tent, my questions suddenly gone. I haven't felt real fear for twenty years. It takes a moment to recognize it.

Once I go inside one of these tents, I cannot go back. My interest—my story—gets revealed.

Once revealed, I am through here. I cannot stay in this camp, in this country, in this region. I might even have to go stateside—some place I haven't been in years—and even then I might not be safe.

When I came here, I was hoping to speak a truth.

Now I'm not even sure I can.

* * * *

6:15 PM Upload: **Suicide Squadron Part 2** by Martha Trumante

Two other devastating explosions occurred in Paris that day: One hundred fifty people died as the elevator going up Eiffel Tower exploded; and another twenty died when a bomb went off in one of the spires near the top of Notre Dame Cathedral.

France went into an unofficial panic. The country had just updated all its security systems in all public buildings. The systems, required by the European Union, were state-of-the-art. No explosives could get into any building undetected—or so the creators of the various systems claimed.

Armand de Monteverde had supervised the tests. He is a systems analyst

and security expert with fifteen years' experience in the most volatile areas—Iraq, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. The United States hired him to establish security at its borders with Mexico and Canada, as well as oversee security at the various harbors along the East, West, and Gulf coasts.

He consulted with the French, went in as a spoiler— someone who tried to break the system—and declared the new process temporarily flawless.

“Why temporarily?” some British tabloid reporter asked him.

“Because,” Monteverde said, “systems can always be beat”

But not usually so quickly, and not without detection. What bothered Monteverde as he pored over the data from all three Paris explosions was that he couldn't find, even then, the holes in the system.

He couldn't find who had brought the explosives in, how they'd been set off, or even what type they were.

No one else had those answers either, and they should have.

Until the Paris bombings, explosives left traces—some kind of fingerprints or signature. Until the Paris bombings, explosives were easy to understand.

* * * *

I slip into the third tent to my left. It's cool inside, not just from the lack of sun, but also because some tiny computerized system runs air conditioning out of mesh, covering the canvas. It's a rich persons tent, installed at great expense.

The tent has furniture, which surprises me. Chairs, blanket-covered beds, two small tables for meals. A woman, sitting cross-legged on a rug near the back, wears western clothing—a thin black blouse and black pants— her black hair cut in a stylish wedge. An eleven-year-old boy, clearly her son, sits beside her. He glances at me, his eyes dark and empty, then goes back to staring straight ahead.

I know he has no internal downloads. The camp doesn't allow any kind of net coverage, even if he has the personal chips. There's some kind of blocking technology that surrounds everything including the medical tent. International agreements allow medical facilities to have net links at all times, but these camps often exist outside an established international perimeter. Even though it straddles the borders of three separate countries, it is in none or all of them, depending on which international law the people in charge of the camp are trying to avoid.

I introduce myself. The woman gives me the look of disbelief that the soldiers should have given me. I slid her my plastic ID, since we have no systems to log onto

here.

She stares at it, then turns it over, sees the hologram of the woman who plays me on the vids, and sighs.

“They warned me,” she says, and I do not ask who they are. They are the people who arranged our meeting, the ones who use dozens of intermediaries, and who probably, even now, believe they are using me for some nefarious purpose. “They warned me you would not be what I expect.”

A shiver runs through me. Even though I am impersonated on purpose so that the “bad guys,” as our president calls them, do not know who I am, someone out there does. Maybe many someone’s. Maybe many someone’s connected to the “bad guys.”

We go through preliminaries, she and I. I sit across from her, slightly out of range of her child’s empty eyes. She offers tea, which I take but do not intend to drink. The cup is small and dainty, trimmed with gold. She has not yet had to trade it for a meal.

Then she slides a chip to me. I press it. A smiling man wearing a western business suit, his head uncovered, his hair as stylishly cut as the woman’s is, grins at me. He holds the hand of a young girl, maybe five, who is the image of her mother. The girl laughs, one of those floaty childish laughs that some people never outgrow. The sound fills the tent, and the boy, sitting across from me, flinches.

“That’s her?” I ask.

“Them,” she says. “He died too.”

I made it a point to know the case. There are so many cases that sometimes the details are irrelevant to all except the people involved. He had just parked his car outside a cafe in Cairo. He had told his wife he was taking his daughter to a special class—and indeed, an English-language class for the children of businessmen who had dealings with the West, was meeting just a block away.

He opened his door and the car exploded, killing him, his daughter, and three people on the sidewalk. If they had made it to class as was the plan, over fifty children would have died.

“She’s so beautiful,” I say. Hard to believe, even now, that a child like that can carry a bomb inside her. Hard to believe she exists only to kill others, at a specified place, at her own designated time.

I have promised myself I will not ask the standard question—*how can you do this? How can you do this to your own child?*

Instead, I say, “Did you know?”

“None of us knew.” Her gaze meets mine. It is fierce, defiant. She has answered this question a hundred times, and her answer has never varied. Like so many survivors, she cannot believe her husband doomed his own child.

But I have promised myself I will get the real story, the story no one else has told. I want to know what it’s like to be part of a society where children are tools, not people to be loved. I want to know how these people believe so much in a cause—any cause—that it is worth not only their own lives, but their child’s as well.

So I must take her initial answers at face value. Perhaps I will challenge them later, but for now, I will see where they lead.

“If neither you nor your husband knew...” I say.

“My son didn’t know either.” Just as fierce. Maybe fiercer. She puts her hand on her son’s head. He closes his eyes, but doesn’t acknowledge her in any other way.

“If none of you knew,” I say, trying hard not to let my disbelief into my voice, “then how did this happen?”

“Like it always does,” she snaps. “They put the chips in at the hospital. On the day she was born.”

* * * *

The job is strange. It cannot be work because you cannot leave at the end of the day. It becomes part of you and you become part of it. That’s why you and your colleagues label it a calling, put it on par with other religions, other callings that deal with ethics.

You sit across from murderers and ask, what made you decide to kill? as if that’s a valid question. You sit across from mass murderers and ask, what is it about your political philosophy that makes your methods so attractive to others? as if you care about the answer.

You think: we need to know, as if knowing’s enough to make the problem go away. As if you did the right thing when you were granted the only meeting ever with some charismatic leader—this generation’s Vlad the Impaler or Hitler or Osama Bin Laden—and interviewed him as if he were a reasonable person. As if you did the right thing when you failed to grab a guards old fashioned pistol, and blow the charismatic leader away.

Later you discuss ethics as if they are an important concept.

You say: your job prevents you from judging other people.

You say: other reporters could not get interviews if we take such lethal sides.

You do not say: I lacked the courage to die for my beliefs.

And that is the bottom line. Behind the talk of ethics and jobs and callings lies a simple truth.

You can look. You can see.

But you cannot feel.

If you feel, you will see that your calling is simply a job, a dirty often disgusting one at that, and you realize there were times when you should have acted. When you could have saved one life or a dozen or maybe even a hundred, but you chose not to.

You chose not to—you say—for the greater good.

* * * *

7:15 PM Upload: **Suicide Squadron Part 3** by Martha Trumante

Investigations always seem to hinge on luck. The Paris investigations are no different.

Three months into sorting the Louvre wreckage, the authorities find a chip, its information largely undamaged. Curiously, its technology was five years old, a detail that stumped the investigators more than anything else.

But not General Pedersen.

“I was watching the news that day,” she says. “I don’t know why. It’s not something I normally do. I usually scan the relevant feeds. But that day, I was watching, and it hit me. I had seen the bomb come into the museum. I’d seen him laugh and rock back and forth and smile in anticipation. I’d thought he was looking forward to his day when really, he was looking forward to his death.”

At first, other security experts would not listen to Pedersen. In a world where suicide bombers had become commonplace—when child suicide bombers packed with explosives were part of the norm—no one could believe that a child could have had a chip implanted years before with enough high density explosives to destroy an entire building.

People could not plan ahead that far, the common wisdom went. People could not be that cruel.

But they were. That was the new truth—or maybe it was an old truth.

They were.

* * * *

She shows me the documents the hospital had her sign. She shows me the diagrams, the little marking some doctor made on a chart of a newborn baby, showing where the chips would be—“chips that will enable her to live in the modern world,” the doctors told her.

She shows me computer downloads, bank accounts her husband set up in her daughter’s name, the college enrollment forms—required for a wealthy child of age four to get into some of Cairo’s best private schools—the plans she and her husband had for her daughters future, her son’s future, *their* future.

The authorities, she tells me, believe her husband created all these accounts and family documents to protect her, to prove that she and her son had nothing to do with the family’s patriotic explosion.

Only he is not political, she tells me. He never was, and no one believes her.

They believe her enough to send her here instead of killing her as so many other families have been killed in the past. They don’t even try or imprison her. They just disown her, her and her son, make them people without a country, refugees in a world filled with refugees.

She can afford this tent on this sandy piece of land. She pays for the space closest to the medical tent. She hoped that someone would befriend her, that the medical personnel—the aide workers—would help her and her unjustly accused son.

Instead, they shun her like everyone else does. They shun her for failing to protect her daughter. They shun her for failing to participate in her husband’s crime. They shun her for being naive, for forcing the so-called patriots to ignore her husband and daughter’s martyrdom, for failing to die with her family.

They shun her because they cannot understand her.

Or because they do not want to.

* * * *

8:15 PM Upload: **Suicide Squadron Part 4** by Martha Trumante

Experts spend their entire career studying this new bombing phenomenon. Some experts who specialized in suicide bombing have moved to this new area of research.

One, Miguel Franq, wanted to know how three families decided to murder their five-year-olds in well-known Paris landmarks on the same day. Initially, he believed he would find a link that would lead him to a terror cell.

When he did not find the link, he worked with some of the scientists to see if the bomb-chips were set to activate on a certain day, then detonate when they were hit with X-rays, laser beams, or sonar equipment—all three being the main items used in security scans.

The intact chip revealed nothing like that. Only a detonator that was set to go off at a particular time on a particular day.

After much research, many hours of survivor interviews, and that inevitable lucky break, Franq found the link. Someone had given the families free tickets to each site. That all three children did not end up at the same tourist attraction is another matter of luck, although what kind of luck no one can say.

Would it have been better to lose more of the Louvre? Or the Eiffel Tower? Or Notre Dame?

Would it have been better to lose one monument instead of damage three? Would more lives have been saved? Lost? Would more people have noticed? Or would less?

* * * *

I speak to all the parents in this part of the enclave. All of them survivors—some male, some female—of a once-intact family. All of them claiming to be non-political, claiming they did not know—nor did their spouse—that their child was programmed to die.

I ask for proof. They give me similar documents. They give me bank accounts. But, tellingly—at least to me—the names of the hospitals vary, the names of the doctors vary.

“It is the nursing staff,” one man says to me.

“It is an outpatient procedure,” says another woman.

“Anyone could do it,” says a second man. “Even you.”

* * * *

The rules of journalism have tightened in the past forty years. The scandals of fifty years ago, the tales of made-up sources, or badly researched material or political bias— true or not—nearly destroyed the profession.

When you were hired, you were reminded of those past scandals, told that any story with less than three *verifiable* sources (sources that have proof of their claims, sources that can be reinterviewed by the fact-checker—no listening to vids [which can be manipulated], no scanning of notes), any story with less than three will not be run. Any such stories appearing in blogs or personal writings will be considered the same as a published or viewed news piece.

Hire an editor for your own work, you're told. You will be watched.

We're all watched.

So you become an observer and a detective, a recorder of your facts and a disbeliever in someone else's. You need to verify and if you cannot, you risk losing your job.

You risk damaging the profession.

You risk losing your calling—because you might believe.

* * * *

Finally, they take me to the person I had hoped to see. They take me into the medical tent to see a six-year-old girl.

She has her own air-conditioned section. It has a hospital bed, a holo-vid player (nothing new; only old downloads), several comfortable chairs, and a table covered with playing cards. Someone is teaching her poker, the international game.

An aide worker accompanies me. He whispers, "No one outside the family visits her. We're not supposed to say she's here."

Until now, she has existed primarily as a rumor.

You know, right, of the little girl? The one who lived?

Permanently blind, she is ...

They pay her millions of Euros just to remain quiet...

She lives in a palace in Switzerland...

... in Baghdad...

... in Singapore...

She lives in a corner of a medical tent in a refugee camp. Her face is crisscrossed with scars and the shiny tissue of a dozen different plastic surgeries. She has only one arm. You don't realize until you come close, that half her torso is a kind of clear plastic, one designed for the medical interns to monitor the fake parts inside her, the miracles that keep her alive.

As I say hello, her eyes move toward me. She can see, then. She says hello in return, her accent upper-class British with a touch of India in it. She looks wary.

I don't blame her.

No patent watches over her. Her mother committed suicide—the real kind, the kind that's personal, and lonely, and takes no one else with it—when she heard the news. The blast killed her father.

She was an only child.

I sit next to her, on her right side so that I don't have to see that clear torso, the workings of her rebuilt interior, that missing—and soon-to-be-replaced—arm.

She is being rebuilt as if she were a machine. Someone is paying for this, real money that keeps this medical tent, and hence the people in the camp, alive.

Someone who, no matter how hard I investigate, manages to remain anonymous.

“Do you know who I am?” I ask.

“Reporter lady,” she says, just like my driver, which makes me nervous. I will not stay here two days. I will leave tonight, maybe even on foot. There are too many connections, too many people who know what I'm doing. Not enough ways to make me safe.

“That's right,” I say. “Reporter lady. Can I talk to you about your accident?”

She makes a face, but half of her skin does not move. “Not an accident,” she says. “I sploded.”

The words, said so flatly, as if it is a fact of life. And, if I think about it, it is. A fact of her life.

A fact of all the lives I've touched here today. Every single one of them knew someone who became a bomb.

"Do you know why you exploded?" I ask.

She nods, runs her remaining hand over her stomach. "Someone put something in me."

So flat. Like a child discussing rape.

"Did your daddy know about this?" I ask. Her father took her to an open-air market that day almost one year ago.

She shakes her head. Those bright, inquisitive eyes have moved away from me. Despite the flat tone, she hates talking about this. Or maybe hates talking about her father, the man who decided she was going to be a weapon.

"What did he say when he took you to the market?" I ask.

"Mommy wasn't feeling so good," she says. "We had to get her some medicine and a flower."

"Nothing else?" I ask.

She shrugs.

"Nothing about going to a better place?" I don't know what euphemism to use. I don't know enough about her or her past, being unable to research much of it. I don't know if she was raised Christian or Muslim or Jewish, since that open-air market catered to all three. I don't even know what nationality she is, something these camps like to keep as quiet as they can.

"No," she says.

"He didn't hug you extra hard? Tell you he loved you? Act strange in any way?"

"No," she says.

"Did your mom?"

"No!"

"Did they ever tell you that you were special?" I ask.

She looks at me again. A frown creases her brow, creating a line between the scars. “Yes.”

My heart starts to pound. “What did they say?”

She shrugs.

“It’s all right to tell me,” I say.

She bites her lower lip. This is a question she clearly hasn’t been asked much. “Special,” she says, “because I’m the only one.”

“The only one what?” I ask.

“The only one they ever wanted.” Her voice shakes. “Everyone else, they have two, three, four.”

I blink for a moment, trying to find the context.

She sees my confusion. Color runs up her cheeks, and I wonder if I’ve made her angry.

That fear returns—that odd sensation. Afraid twice in one day, after years without it. Afraid, of a damaged six-year-old girl.

“My daddy said I was so perfect, they only wanted me. Only me.” Her voice rises, and she squeezes something in her hand.

The aide worker appears at the door. He looks sadly at me. I stand. My time is up.

As I walk out, he says, “She was an only child, in a culture that frowns on it. Her parents were trying to make her feel good about that.”

“Is that what you think?” I ask.

“You’re not the first she’s told that to,” he says. “Investigators, officials, everyone tries to find the two, three, and four others. You people never seem to remember that she’s a lonely little girl, in a lot of pain, who can’t understand why everyone thinks she’s evil.”

I look over my shoulder at her. Her lower lip trembles, but her eyes are dry.

I want to go back, ask her different questions, but the aide worker doesn’t let me.

I am done here. I had hoped I would find my proof. Instead, I found a child whose parents told her she was special—because she was an only child? Or because they had planted a time-release bomb-chip in her?

Or both?

* * * *

9:15 PM Upload: **Suicide Squadron Part 5** by Martha Trumante

The Paris bombings were the first and last time more than one child detonated in the same city on the same day. Ever since, these explosions have occurred at all times of the day, at hundreds of locations across the globe, at thousands of targets—some large, like the Eiffel Tower, and some small, like a deceptively normal home in a tiny suburban neighborhood.

The small bombings lend credence to the rumors that have plagued this weapon from the beginning: that these children and their parents are innocent victims of fanatics who have wormed their way into the medical establishment, that the true bombers aren't suicidal at all. Instead they are nurses, doctors, interns, who piggyback the detonator chip onto a relatively normal chipping procedure—giving a child an identity chip, for example, or the standard parental notification chip that must now be inserted into every newborn—a procedure that's a law in more than one hundred twenty countries.

Hospitals insist that medical personal are screened. Each chip brought into the building is scanned for foreign technology. Each chip has its own identification number so that it can be traced to its source.

None of the chips found at the thousands of bomb sites since the Paris bombings have had hospital identification. Yet the rumors persist.

Perhaps it is wishful thinking on the part of all involved. How much easier it is to blame a nameless faceless person hidden in the impersonal medical system than a parent who knowingly pays someone to place a bomb inside a child—a bomb that will not go off in days or even weeks, but years later, after that parent spends time feeding, clothing, and raising that child.

Bonding with that child.

Treating her as if she's normal.

Treating her as if she's loved.

* * * *

One of the soldiers gives you a ride back to the Green Zone. You lean your head against the back of his modern, hydrogen-powered, air-conditioned behemoth—too big to even call a truck—and close your eyes.

The little girl has shaken you. Sonic stories do that— some interviews do that—and the key is to hold onto your professionalism, to remember what you can prove.

But in that space between wakefulness and sleep, you find yourself thinking that you live your life in three distinct ways: You have your everyday experiences, which are so different from most people's. How many people travel from war zone to war zone, from danger spot to danger spot, running toward the crisis instead of away from it? Such behavior is now second nature to you. You think of it only at odd moments, like this one, when you should be asleep.

You also live through your articles, your “live” reports, your blogs. People who see/read/hear those things believe they know the real you. They believe they have walked with you into the valley of the shadow of death, and they believe that they, like you, have survived some kind of evil.

Really, however, you live inside your head, in the things you're afraid to write down, afraid to record, afraid to even feel. You lied when you implied that fear hasn't been in your life in decades. Fear is in your every movement. But you speak truth when you say you haven't *felt* fear.

You haven't felt anything in a long, long time.

That's the most important thing they fail to tell you when you sign up for this job. Not that it could kill you or that you might even want it to kill you.

But that you can look at a little girl who has lost everything—her health, her family, her belief that someone once loved her—and you think she does not measure up to the rumor. She isn't the story that will save you, the news that will make you even more famous than you already are.

She doesn't even merit a mention in your long piece on suicide squads because she doesn't change anything. She is, to you, another body—another item—another fact in a lifetime of useless facts.

She is not a child, any more than you are a woman.

She is a weapon, and you are a reporter.

And that's all you'll ever be.