

The truck on which they ferried it across the border had distinctive mudflaps.

“Look for distinctive mudflaps,” @ChuvaKurka might have said.

She was a good student, so she had a habit of checking the sources. Down at the bottom of the page was a link to the Project’s Discord channel. She had never used Discord, so she had to install it. When she did, it was about three days before the full-scale Russian invasion. Everyone was going a little crazy. By the night it started, she was hooked. She watched in real-time as the first rockets came in. On the Kharkiv feed, an array of airbursts cracked over the city. In silence, the cluster warheads rippled across the apartment blocks, the little blue houses, the tabacs and traffic snarl. One of the towers went over. Cars caught fire. Smoke lifted from the ruin. She’d watched for a while, and then in comfort fitfully slept.

That was—Jesus, was the war already four weeks old? The first days had been heady, the rush of learning skills she had thought were reserved for actual spies: how to decipher cryptic radio transmissions, where to find old Soviet Army maps, the Order of Battle of the 126th Coastal Defense Brigade and the capabilities and characteristics of their various weapon systems—and finding that she was good at the work. It took a generalist’s mind, comfortable with learning just a little bit of forensic analysis, the basics of radio propagation, how to triangulate a distant object seen from two known locations. She had always been quick, but bored. To use a single talent over and over left her feeling dull, distracted. The Project was something new every login—a new puzzle, requiring a new skillset, and people from around the world to help her get those skills.

They were a bizarre collective, and their motivations were varied, difficult to pin down. Why help someone so far? Why devote effort, time, even hazard—moral or otherwise? She didn’t know any of them, even @ChuvaKurka, well enough to answer. Some of the people in the Project were virtual stringers, reporters in their underwear in Zagreb, Cape Town, Toledo. Some were wannabe warriors reveling in all the unedited combat footage, chasing the high without the risk of being blown apart by a Russian