

The roll-call bell began to ring with almost enough volume to cause eardrums to disintegrate, shattering the uneasy illusion of tranquility that surrounded the military compound. The scant wildlife that was foolish enough to reside in the vicinity took its cue, birds and rodents diving into whatever nearby cover they could find in a manner that would have made the academy's instructors proud.

The door to one of the nearby brick buildings swung open, its creaks and groans completely drowned out by the clangor of that infernal bell. A rather motley collection of individuals gradually beginning to stream through, heading out into the main courtyard in a manner that suggested they were in no particular hurry. As the deafening ringing subsided after what felt like an eternity, those with the ability to adjust their hearing quickly would have found its sound replaced by subdued whispers and murmuring, along with the sound of shuffling feet as the recruits started to form themselves up into ragged rows and columns.

It was clear that these recruits were not exactly the army's finest.

Due to the fact that the country was in a rather prolonged state of war, the more capable aspects of the armed forces were deployed elsewhere, stationed off in a foreign country thousands of miles away. Casualties were not shockingly high (although, of course, all casualties are shocking in nature), but the simple matter of logistics was playing merry hell with available manpower and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the powers that be were growing increasingly nervous of having all available military assets deployed halfway around the world. What if there was a sudden and unexpected invasion?

And so a defence force was formed, built up mostly of part-timers and augmented by regular soldiers who had been ill, injured or somehow otherwise indisposed when the troops were all shipped out. Things weren't severe enough to justify the dreaded idea of conscription (yet), and as such the new recruits were all willing volunteers, although their level of motivation was sometimes questionable and a few had clearly found the reality of the situation to be considerably different to their expectations.

Aryn was different. She was clearly exceptionally motivated and appeared to be positively enamoured with almost all aspects of her training, and even had a quite respectable level of fitness. This all served as a source of consternation for one or two of her instructors – if she was so eager and apparently well-suited to the military, then why was she stuck in this reserve force instead of being part of the regulars? Still, in their haste to get new recruits they decided they shouldn't question their apparent good-fortune, choosing instead to be pleased that they had been blessed with such a talented individual.

The day's instructor marched out into the courtyard with that unique pomp that only those in a position of authority can exude, and the recruits lethargically brought themselves to attention with varying degrees of prowess. Aryn positively snapped into position, bolt upright and with such an energetic salute that she was in danger of decapitating the person next to her. The instructor got himself into position in front of the recruits, yelling at them in some barely comprehensible bastardisation of English and giving them the kind of disapproving glare that you might give your pet dog after it has eaten your favourite pair of slippers. With such formalities out of the way, he ordered the recruits to stand at ease and began to fill them in on the activities they had in store for the day ahead. A brief summary of the instructor's information follows, as

this seems a much more attractive alternative to including his entire speech verbatim, particular when considering the numerous pauses to admonish various recruits for their improper behaviour.

The likelihood of an incursion into the country's borders was remote, and the likelihood of them bringing a significant amount of heavily armoured vehicles was even more remote. Despite this, the government had decided to take the phrase "better safe than sorry" to a whole new level, and the defence force was to be trained in the deployment and usage of various anti-armour weapons. Since the portable anti-tank weapons of the time were borderline useless, and most of the good heavy stuff had already been sent off to some remote corner of the world, the only remaining viable option was to school some of the recruits in the operation of the outdated-but-functional TD-07 "Venkman" Tank Destroyer.

It's hard to do justice to the process of Aryn's face lighting up over the course of this speech. She had started the session in her usual chipper way, and there was an inkling of a smile as she realised that there was a (very slim) possibility that she might actually get to see a real tank "in the flesh." This had grown to a broad grin by the time the notion of tank destroyers was raised, along with a hard-fought struggle against the temptation to giggle inappropriately. Her nearby fellow recruits watched in some combination of amusement, bafflement and hostility.

Far beyond grinning, Aryn was almost bouncing around with sheer delight after the instructor had announced that she would be one of the first pair of recruits to go for a drive. Lead by the instructor, she proceeded to half march, half skip all the way to the waiting vehicle while her crew partner, a young man the instructor addressed as Wilson, walked along behind in a less eager manner, a growing expression of worry etched on his face. She had opened the vehicle's hatch and climbed halfway inside before Wilson had even put his headgear on, and only stopped when the instructor coughed and gave some basic instructions.

"I want you to do a simple lap of the course," he stated, performing a circular gesture as he spoke, "along by this wall, then down by the fence, then back up along the other wall and around here. Don't go too fast, and try not to hit the barrels... or the walls, for that matter. If you behave then we'll do some shooting later."

With a cursory nod, Aryn disappeared into the belly of the metallic beast, quickly getting herself nice and comfortable in the driver's seat. Wilson took position right at the top of the vehicle, acting as commander and gunner (although he wouldn't have any gunnery to do for a while), his head poking out of the turret hatch – a fact which, when combined with his ill-fitting helmet and the panicked expression on his face, couldn't be described as anything other than hilarious. He repositioned the microphone built into his helmet, pulling it down in front of his mouth and tapping it a few times before speaking into it.

"Hey, is this working?" Wilson enquired, or at least attempted to; he was midway through the word "this" when his voice was drowned out by the sound of the Venkman's engine firing up. Undeterred by this, and taking his role as commander perhaps a little too seriously, he waited for the noise to die down a little before shouting his first instruction. "Forward!" he yelled, stating the obvious and signaling wildly with one arm despite the fact his driver couldn't even see him.

In fact, Aryn could barely hear him. His voice was mostly drowned out by the noise of the engine, and she exacerbated the problem by mercilessly gunning it, causing the tank destroyer to lurch forward suddenly. The revving of the engine was now matched by the metallic clanking of the wheels and caterpillar tracks whirring around just outside the vehicle's cockpit, accompanied by scratching and grinding as they desperately clawed for traction on the concrete surface of the training course.

The vehicle's controls were surprisingly straightforward. Aryn managed to deftly navigate around the first corner without too much drama using the vision slit in the vehicle's front armour to survey the surroundings, and Wilson provided his own unique form of running commentary too. "Look out for...!" he screeched, instantly followed by the sickening sound of metal being crumpled, crushed and twisted into a mangled mess as they drove clean over one of the barrels that was supposed to constitute some kind of barrier. The Venkman wasn't designed for head-to-head conflict with tanks, but it was built well enough to crush most obstacles, presumably so that it could seek out the perfect vantage point to fire from.

The tragic demise of that poor barrel only served to heighten Aryn's power trip. She began to fantasise about exacting spectacular revenge upon all the people who'd agitated her recently, laughing maniacally as images of driving over her landlord's stupid little car entered her mind – that would teach him for raising her rent! – and those clowns at the phone company who'd put her on hold for hours would get a surprise when an umpteen-tonne armour-plated machine of destruction crashed through their office walls. Her fists clenched and her muscles tensed, contorting the vehicle's controls into more and more uncomfortably excessive positions. The tank destroyer started moving faster... and faster...

The first clue that something was wrong was when the sound of treads on concrete was replaced by the sound of treads tearing into something considerably less substantial, the second clue was that the vision slit suddenly became rather dark and uninformative, and the third clue was the almighty splash and the fact that the vehicle interior was slowly filling up with water. Aryn snapped back into a state of perfect mental clarity at that point – she hated water and couldn't swim – and started trying to extricate herself from the straps that held her safely in her seat, fumbling around in blind panic as the water level reached her waist.

She'd managed to get herself free of the chair's nefarious clutches by the time the water was halfway up her chest, and her attention turned to opening the outer hatch. After a good deal of swearing, grunting, screaming and other sounds that are frankly indescribable, the hatch popped open and Aryn hauled herself up and out of the vehicle, shivering and soaking wet as she sprawled across its muddy metallic top. The engine spluttered pathetically, causing the entire vehicle to spasm in an almost pitiful way.

The tank destroyer was half submerged in the river. The safety fence had a gaping hole in it, and Wilson was sitting on his backside some distance beyond that, apparently having bailed out. He looked terribly confused. Further in the distance was a veritable stampede of recruits, and an instructor who looked "more than a little cross."