



Lightning Never Strikes Twice

It smelled like sweat, and copper. Kryza hadn't slept in two days. Her hands shook whenever she took them off the two drive-levers that controlled the tracks of the *Lothenz*, so she kept them gripped in her grime-streaked hands. Her bloodshot eyes darted to the blinking light above the low-frequency radar that buzzed next to her head. Nothing yet. But they were close, she could feel it. Kryza made two quick bangs with her hand on the metal bar above her head. It was the first movement anyone had made in hours. The sound was negligible, but the vibrations were felt by whoever sat in the cramped alcove containing their meagre mapping and surveying equipment. A short pause, then a whispered set of headings from Samuel. Kryza didn't make any acknowledgement but made the minute course corrections. She didn't even know if she could speak at this point, her throat was so parched. Even if she could, she probably wouldn't have. Rationally, it made no sense: the *Lothenz* made enough noise to cover up a gunshot while idling, and they were pushing near max speed. But as the jingling necklace wrapped around the sliding viewports handle hadn't failed her yet, at this point doing anything to offend fate seemed unbelievably foolish. The *Revenge* certainly didn't need the help.

Another whispered set of numbers. Kryza's heart sped up a bit. They were almost to New Hamburg. She heard underneath the tense exhaustion of Samuel's voice the underpinnings of what she herself felt: hope. They were so close now, to the safety of New Hamburg's gun wall. Not even the *Revenge* would risk their ire. She resisted the urge to speed up. The capacitor bank that sat at the back of the *Lothenz* has still drawing charge from the chugging Dycon. The additives Ashlobb had mixed into the 2nd rate fuel slop they siphoned from the West-South pipelines seemed to have done their job, and the beat up engine was still ticking despite the red-line performance she had subjected it to. Barely. She scanned the horizon through the limited vision her forward viewport provided her. They were on the top of the Sugwendo plateau, the highest part of their journey back from the drop off with the strange American pirates in the South-Basin. It had been the third time they had made the trip under the new deal worked between the Community Council and the pirates: survey data for the Americans green money. Kryza didn't much care for the specifics, but it seemed like it made trade easier for the merchant caravans that made the dangerous trips West to France, or at least that's what's her brother said at dinner. He went on and on about currency reserves, the importance of restoring global trade, the stocks he had invested in. Kryza had been born in New Hamburg, and didn't know anything else: the harsh sweeps of the Grey, the labyrinthine layout of the landscape around her. The necessity of maintaining the armored convoys that kept them fed and safe. What happened beyond the Last Range didn't concern her, or New Hamburg for that matter.

But if closer relations with the West is what the council wanted, its what the council would get. She would keep protecting it, and her family, all the same.



The radar beeped.

The atmosphere in the tank got heavier. Kryza swallowed. It hurt. She kept their course, watching the fading light on the screen in front of her. Neither of them exhaled for a long moment, as they waited for the second alert. It pinged again. Closer this time. “Shit,” spat Kyrza. “Why the fuck is he still on us?” She looked over her shoulder at Samuel, who stared back at her with a mixture of steely determination and wild desperation. She imagined she looked the same. Without a word, they came to an understanding. “BATTLESTATIONS!” she barked hoarsely. No more whispering. The inside of the tank exploded with a flurry of movement. Samuel clambered down to the bottom of the *Lothenz*, his lanky body squeezing underneath the darkened gunner display. Kryza locked the forward motion of the *Lothenz* to straight ahead, and in a swift motion hauled down the main panel for the systems control center from its tucked away position to the left of the viewport. She flicked the main power switch on. Light flickered through the *Lothenz* for a moment, the electronic buzzing of the rapidly powering-up circuitry around her overlapping with the clicking and blinking of the color-coded buttons coming to life. She braced her bent pointer finger under the first of the ignition switches. “RCS stable?” Samuel looked over at the twitching needle attached to the gunnery control station. “Stabish.” Kryza grimaced.

They had been running on minimal power to avoid detection. The *Lothenz*, when its weapons were hot threw up a radio-thermal signature visible for miles. Coming out of a cold shutdown like that was supposed to be done slowly, and without the drive actuators at full tilt. She hesitated for a moment more. “Starting full-power sequence.” Samuel nodded tersely. “Acknowledged. Gunnery ready.” They didn’t have much choice. They had engaged the *Revenge* twice before, and it hadn’t gone well either time. They were going to need everything the *Lothenz* could give them. She flicked the first switch on. “INV G-ROT 1 to 5, active, confirm.” “G-ROT 1 to 5, active, confirmed. Sighting now.” The dark gunnery lit up, its grainy green glow bathing Samuel as he began a quick test of the cannons controls. Kryza thumbed up the plastic cap next to the switch and depressed the knob beneath it, holding it with her thumb and middle finger. “Telemetry FRVS live, dialing in.” “Received, Gunnery accepting.” Kryza slowly turned the textured knob, clicking it past each power setting. “Telemetry set, target in range.” “Pilot acknowledge, locking telemetry.” She pushed the knob pack in, and let the plastic cover fall back into place. She felt the engine shake for a moment as it shuddered under the increased load. “ReComp 1, live” Confirmed, ReComp 1.” She heard Samuel swear from behind her. “Recoil compensator 1 failed, switching to ReComp 2, pilot.” “Acknowledged, stand by for reroute.” A moment passed. “Reroute complete, status?” “Comp 2 confirmed. Visual on enemy Treads.” There was a slight tremor in his voice. “It’s the *Revenge*.” Kryza nodded. Of course it was, but now they knew for certain. “Telemetry course?” “Intercept route, two thousand yards. Hostile weapons in range... six-hundred yards.” That made sense. If they made it to the end of the plateau, they’d be on the approach to the valley, and back in home territory. Better to take them here, at their most exposed part of the journey. Between them lay a part of the old forest,



one of the ones still untouched by the purple kudzu present in the South, but the second half of the plateau was unobstructed, save for a smattering of ridges and hills. “Running to route 3, we’ll try to outrun him to...” she trailed off. This shadow had been haunting them all the way from the Basin. He had killed the Coloumb. Even if they made it to the valley, he’d still be out there, waiting for them the next time they sallied out. The rattling and buzzing of the tank faded out. The exhaustion over the past few days hovered at the edge of her mind, threatening to shut her down. Her body was screaming for food and movement outside the cramped confines of her surroundings. She pushed all that aside. The second ridge on the right.

“Gunnery, belay that. Prepare for direct combat, pattern 0 6 0.” Samuel hesitated. “Kryza?” With a grunt, she held down the red glowing arming button until its neighbor lit up green. “Trust me, Samuel.” Samuel looked at her for another moment, then went back to the screen. “Combat acknowledged, going to ready 1. *Lothenz* Cannon system check shows green.” Kryza flicked the series of arming switches on in sequential order, each one making an audible pop as the indicators above them blinked from red to green. She watched the kilovolts tick up on the meter next to her as it read the capacitors total charge. “1000 yards to intercept.” She seized the locked controls and freed them to her care, and brought the *Lothenz* around to the right, away from the valley entrance. She glanced out of the left viewport, just for a moment. The angle was bad, and the dust being thrown up by the *Lothenz*’s flight blocked much of what she could see, but she saw it. Just for a moment, pulling parallel to their alerted course. The *Revenge*. There wasn’t a man, woman or child in New Hamburg that hadn’t heard of the *Revenge*, or its immortal captain. A bloodthirsty regent, set on only violent mayhem and slaughter. It was midnight black, scorched to the very soul by the fire that fused bone and steel together. So the story’s said. At this point, she was half-inclined to believe them. “Black-mask Morgan...,” breathed Samuel. He could see it better than her on the gunnery sights. Kryza shook her head. “Gunnery, get ready to fire on my mark. We’re going to get one shot.” Samuel gripped the two turret maneuvering handles. “Right. Ready on mark.” The ridge was approaching. On the other side, a sheer drop into the Fools Ravine, a narrow canyon that ran halfway through the plateau but dead ended before it reached the south Basin. If her plan worked-

A chill suddenly ran down her spine. Time seemed to slow for a split second, the silver glitter from the necklace she pulled from the Colomb’s wreckage sparkling in her eye. She jerked the controls to the left. A metal-crunching impact, then the ear-splitting boom off to their right. The explosion washed over the *Lothenz*, and Kryza fought the machine to keep it steady. A deflection. Too close. They had lost all of their reactive armor in the previous engagements and had taken a beating since then. That shot had been lethal. If the *Revenge* got another one, he wouldn’t let her get lucky again. “Target acquired, pilot. Holding position, 300 yards out. Kilovolts at 1.2 million and charging. Ready to fire.” Samuel’s voice was shaking, but Kryza knew she could count on him. During the Trials, he was the only one to get close to Louis’s legendary 1000 yard shot to the base of the Horn. Even now, staring down the embodiment of their nightmares, Kryza hadn’t heard a single de-lock notification from the telemetry system. He



was keeping near perfect accuracy on the *Revenge*, despite the maneuvers the *Lothenz* was being put through. That wouldn't matter, though, if the *Revenge* turned them into molten slag, and there was only place he couldn't do that. Kyrza gauged the distance between them. She couldn't close it in time even if she opened up the throttle all the way. She eyed the blue ripcord next to her foot. Well, if the engine exploded, they'd be just as dead as if it didn't, so why not. "NITRO!" she shouted out, before pulling back on the metal top as hard as she could. She turned towards the *Revenge*, dead ahead.

She felt the roar, the sudden acceleration. The whole tank shook and sputtered, before leaping forward. She heard the engine begin to make horrible noises and Samuel yell out in surprise. None of it mattered. She was the machine, and it was her. She felt the next shot coming, reversed the direction of her treads, and pulled slightly to the right. Her speed barely dropped, and the projectile sailed past them. The *Lothenz* slid sideways, treads spinning against the dirt under them. She corrected the direction. Faster. The *Revenge* was right in front of them, still moving towards the ridge. Perfect. A collision like this would-

The *Revenge* spun towards them, and leaped forward. It was now directly facing them. Kyrza had only a brief moment to consider how much this was about to hurt. The *Revenge* collided head-on with the *Lothenz* in a jarring crash of metal on metal.

Smoke filled the cabin. The horrific screeching of spinning treads thundered around her. It felt like someone had dropped a sack of bricks on her torso. She grunted in pain. "Gunnery? All..." she spit out a mouthful of blood. Bit her tongue. "All system's status?" Samuel swore. "Telemetry's down. Comp2 just blew. Comp3 not responding. Drive is still functional." Kyrza fumbled for the control panel. "Weapons?" Samuel made a negative sound. "Get them back on, Sam," Kyrza breathed. "Get them back or we're dead." She pulled the control panel down towards her. It was dead. She let it go, gripping the steering again. In the brief exchange between them, the *Lothenz* and the *Revenge* were still straining against the force of the other. To Kyrza's dismay, she realized the *Revenge* was winning. Right now, the thickest part of their armor was pressed right up against the *Revenge*'s sunken turret. If it fired, there was a good chance it wouldn't be a kill shot, and would almost certainly damage, if not outright disable, the barrel. A less disciplined crew would have tried to avoid her ramming attempt, and fired at her as she approached. The downtime between recovering from the collision and reloading their next shot would've given them a decent chance putting a shot in the *Revenge*'s ass before making it to the ridge, and over it the *Revenge* would have to waste precious time picking up their trail again. In the twisting formations that led up to New Hamburg, escape would've been a cinch. Now, if the *Lothenz* got pushed to one side, he still had a shot in the chamber. They couldn't break out from this contest, or the next shot would go right through the thinner armor on the *Lothenz*'s flank. Kyrza felt her heart sink. It was all she could do to keep them straight against the grinding, blackened hull of the *Revenge*. "Weapons online." She was going to die here, almost home. "Kyrza! Weapons hot!" She'd never see the rain-slicked slopes of-



Something landed on top her head. Kyrza whirled around. It was a shoe. “Weapons. Hot! Give me something to shoot at, pilot Kyrza!” The world came back into focus. “Right. Acknowledged, gunnery! Prepare to fire on my mark. Its going to be the faster draw.” Samuel didn’t say anything, but he didn’t need to. There was only one option left. “Disengaging. Left side, gunnery.” Kyrza took a deep breath. It hurt. The straps of her harness would leave a hell of a bruise pattern. If they lived. “Disengage...”

The *Lothenz*’s right track sped up. The left one came to a clanging halt. The *Revenge* kept coming, and the *Lothenz* began to expose its flank to the *Revenge*. The *Revenge*’s turret moved with them. It could feel its next kill, a long hunt after a worthy quarry. But quarry, nonetheless. As naturally as it breathed, the *Revenge* fired. The shell came from the bowels of the shell autoloader. “...MARK!” It spun into position, and launched out of the barrel in less than a second. As it left the barrel in a puff of thin smoke, it met an unexpected obstacle. A thin, gold needle. It touched the shell just as it exited. It was trailed by an even thinner wire, connected back to the *Lothenz*’s cannon. The moment it made connection, 1.3 million kilovolts of charge stored in the *Lothenz*’s capacitor banks were emptied down its length. For a brief moment, the magnetic force produced by the sheer magnitude of the current being produced held the charge together. A tiny, extremely dense core of concentrated current. The eggheads in New Hamburg called it plasma. To Kryza, it was the Grey’s lightning. The shell exploded. The current went through it, jumping to the barrel behind it, coruscating down its length. Into the *Revenge*. In the split second that happened, the magnetic force keeping the wire from instantly vaporizing collapsed. The super-heated air surrounding the beam exploded outwards, the shockwave ripping into the two hulls. The sound was deafening, a crack of thunder that drowned out every other noise beneath its fury. All of this in a split second, before Kryza could even blink.

All was chaos. There was more smoke in the cabin, thick black smoke. She couldn’t hear anything but a incessant humming. She felt hands on her shoulder, unbuckling her from the driver harness. They pulled her up, and over, out of the *Lothenz*. She was moving, towards the ridge. Everything went dark.

She gasped and bolted upright. She was lying face down in the dirt. She sat up. Samuel was lying next to her, blood covering his head. She felt a stab of fear, but before she could do anything, he rolled over. He also sat up. The burning wreck of the *Lothenz* was in the distance, blue and green flames dancing over it. Kryza looked at him and nodded in appreciation. “Thank you.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Could have gotten a lot farther if I had my other shoe.” Kyrza chuckled. It became a laugh, a long one. Samuel tried to remain serious, but after a moment the two of their cackles were rolling over the plateau. After the fit subsided, Kyrza turned to Samuel again. “Seriously, that was a hell of a shot. I think I heard the *Revenge* shoot too, so you must have hit the damn shell in midair, otherwise we wouldn’t be having this conversation.” Samuel fiddled with the blue jumpsuit he was wearing. “Was just a guess. It was about the same time in-between each shot the last few times, so I was pretty sure they had an autoloader. Consistent to follow.” Kyrza stood shakily to her feet. “Well, it was a good enough guess to take out the *Revenge*.” A



grin spread across her face. “We killed the *Revenge*, Samuel.” She offered a hand to him, who took it and hauled himself to his feet. They stood there for a moment, gazing at the burning wreck of the *Lothenz*. From this distance, she couldn’t see the other hull. The smoke from the *Lothenz* was obscuring it, of course. “HQ should see the smoke. They’ll send out a patrol within a few hours, I imagine. They won’t come onto the plateau but should be able to get a ride back to the Wall from the valley,” Samuel mused. Kyrza nodded in agreement. “Sound plan. Let's get down the ridge.” They turned their backs on the wreckage and began walking towards their distant home.