
Cold Fire
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2006 saw publication of *Here in Cold Hell*, the second volume in the author's Lionwolf Trilogy (Tor Macmillan), *Piratica 2: Return to Parrot Island*, the second book in a female pirate saga (Dutton), as well as *L'Amber* from Egerton House. Egerton House has just released two more novels, *Creyglass* and *To Indigo*, while the last Lionwolf novel, *No Flame But Mine*, and the third Piratica book are due out later this year. Ms. Lee has recently sold short stories to *Weird Tales* and *Realms of Fantasy* and novellas to Firebird and the SF Book Club.

We was ten mile out from Chalsapila, and it's a raw night. The sea mist brewing thick as wool. Then little tramp ship come alongside. I on the bridge with Cap'n. He my brother. Kinda. Jehosalee Corgen. Well. But sudden the tramper puts up her lights. She's gotten a lot of sail on for what she's at, maybe tracking tobaccer or hard liquor up and down. They take a need of that, in the little ports along Great Whale Sound.

—Fuckendam, say Corgen. —What this bitch go to want?

I shrug, don't I. How the hell I know. I amn't no sailor, I. He picks me up drunken at Chalsa, tooken me aboard. I can trim bit of sails, take a watch, that kinda stuff.

Now the tramper swim in close, making signal.

Across the black night water, Corgen and her cap'n speak.

Sounds threat-like ta me.

—What he say? ask Beau, the mate.

Afore I can offer, he goes up ter see.

Then so does I.

We stand there on the poop, with the great wing of foresails over, and lanterns flash, and I hear other cap'n tells Corgen—Hey, this good for ye and yor crew. Make lotta dolla.

—Don't need no more cargo, say Corgen.

—Nar, yer take this, no cargo, just tow. Like horse with wagon.

—This gurl ain't no horse, say Corgen.

—Hey hey, she a good ship. Has the weight ta do it.

I think the guy on tramper he sound like a Rus. Looks too, big, good-looken guy, and beard.

He say, —All ye do, tow dammen thing outa back and up. Get maybee nine hundred dolla. We given ye wodka too.

Shooting star is went over, like a silver angel spit.

Seems to me maybee guy on tramper is eying me real much. I go off. Then Beau come back aways. —Govment, say Beau from mouth corner. —Seems we havta.

Corgen's busyness on sea never much legal. But govment boats turn a blind ey, ifn you make nice. So we'll do this, what so this is.

In a bit, tramper boys bring some stuff aboard, boxes, a crate, wodka in big cans like for kerosene. They gives ta Corgen where to go to pick up thing wants the towing, and he writes down careful. He sign a paper too. The tramper turns off up the side of the night.

Boxes, stuff, full of food.

I hear Beau ask Corgen soon what the fuckdam we be go to carry.

—Chunk bludy ice, Corgen say. —Chunka ice and tow her up into bludy Artic.

—So high?

—Higher maybee. High as she go.

—For why in Christ's name?

Corgen shrug. —For nine hundred dolla.

Weather is clear, sea nearly smooth. Now we was sailing norard easterly, where the tramper say go. And all that pass us is fisher boats for the cod-fish, and the faint shadow that come and go of the land. First night ends and then a day, and when the sun low, making the sky red, Hammer up in look-out call he can see something new on the water. Men went go up rigging, to see, and so do I. Hanging there I can make out a kinda island, but it all put together of boats and rafts, with nets drifting, and there torchlights burn, so's as the red sea and sky getten black, this island what is no island, she go red.

—What there behind?

We crane forard like birds, stretch our necks. Behind the torch smokings stand something pale, like it was a misty pane of glass, so the dark-ness show through.

—A berg what that is.

—Nar. None of they here.

—A berg, I tells you. They come down this far, from Grenland. A great narrer one.

Like a piece of glass, like I say, so it is. A piece of great ice, chipped offn sailing free, as the icebergs do.

Then come another ship, a big one she is, with no colors but with guns, and men on her

deck all armed, officers and soldiers, only they ain't wear-ing any uniform, but you can see they are, the ways they's stood.

Corgen and Beau and Bacherly, they get rowed offn away.

We set ta wait. Don't go no closer.

Over on the island of boats men move around in the light and shadow, can't see what they do, that's all. The berg, if it a berg, none of us sure, goes fainter in the smokes.

Along of midnight, Corgen and the others they bring back.

Corgen has face like dried white fish. Other two ain't much pinker.

They come aboard. Corgen grabs me. —Pete O Pete, say Corgen.—Christ. I never shoulda took this on. Thin luck, the days we leaves Chalsapila.

Then he puts his head down on my shoulder, like as when we was childa and ma was raw ter him.

The six other men on Corgen's bucket, they clusters around, and the over us sails nod, cos the wind's getting up from the south.

—Cap'n, what's to do?

He lifts his head. He look scared and sick.

—Never word'll come outa me, he say. —Shitten govment say we must, so we do. I can't tell you. You'll be to see it, morning come.

We stand round him, and his boys look like they have mutiny running in the back of their eyes. Then Corgen rechanges to his own self. He reach out and grip Hammer and Bacherly and shake pair of them so as the bones rattle under their clothes. —We got no choosing. Like birth and dy-ing. No choosen. So we take it. Bruk the wodka out, Beau. We've a long haul to the North fuckdam Pole.

Second night on the new course, two of Corgen's men jump over. You can see the land, can reach it if swim strong, and though that sea cold, men have their reasons.

Another man, Bacherly, he go over next night and not so lucky. Struck the side and stunned him. He's drunken, I guess. We pull him back aboard and empty him of water, but then he lie raving and shaken till Corgen speak to him. —I tell him, bite yer tongue or I'll throw ye back down.

Sight of land is gone by then. Bacherly is quiet, but sometimes he puke, or he cries.

The others is make to be brave. A coupla of them make pretend we don't tow no thing at all. Ando cusses a lot. He anyway allays do that.

None of them much goes aft to look. It doesn't matter if they looks, it amn't a danger—no moren towing it. They did tell us, when they brung it, and all the cables and chain was fixed and the hooks to hold all, they do tell us then, the ice on the berg is old and set so hard, thick as stone wall, the officer say, ten feet—forget it—this more twenty feet thick of ice. Can't stir. Can't break. This why it must be took to go upways north, to the Pole, this why. Though it came, officer believe, from the Southron Pole below, all the wide mile down at the earth's

end. From there. And all this time, the ice held. So now, cold as we go, now it shall never give way. He swears that too, on the Bible.

Since Chalsapila, when Corgen finds me in alley, I don't drink. Even the Rus blue and black wodka, sharp as spikes, I left it alone.

I saw to the work I can do, and I eat when others have their food, though they keep back the food the tramper gave us for when this is done and over. Also I play them cards. Corgen gives me some money, so I can gamble on cards too and pay up when lose, which I do. Sometimes when I climb up the yards, I tend the ties and canvas, but then I set a while, and look back along the ship to her stern, back to where the berg is. It is about half ship's length behind, seems to drift there. If was not for the iron ca-bles, you should think it only followed us.

He said, the officer, the ice is twenty feet thick.

Yet I see through. Transparent, the officer say, like crystal, this type of berg. Means nothing, still thick as five stone walls.

By see through it, I mean it's as like you look through frost on glass. I remember a gurl once, she wants her drink in a frost glass. Like that.

If any of the others see me, staring back, they never show at that time. Only Bacherly is sick, crying in the hold on his blankets. When I go to want to give him the hot soup he throws it down and he say I'm mad, to sail the ship. He say I never needed to go on, I coulda gone over side and ashore, I, like the other two that jumped over. He forget me that I can't swim.

But anyhow, strange though that is, I amn't afraid of it. What I am feel-ing as I look at it, I don't think to be fear. But each day or night then, ei-ther I'm up in the rigging, and watch toward the stern, or then I go up on the aft deck, and whoever is to be there at wheel, he give me a glance.

One say —Right glad I am that sail tween me and that sea.

One say —You insane, Pete Corgen. I allays knew ye was. Is drink rottened yor brain.

As him he drink from wodka can.

But I go on by to rail, and I stood there, and I look. The first night I am doing it, the moon's up, and the biggest, brightest of the stars. Shines right through the ice, like the electric light in the bar shone through that gurl's frost glass.

I never am mad, as that man say. I be have seen them as are mad. I am not.

Now it seems, that first time, never I see it so good, not when it come, and they ties it to the ship. Perhaps then I couldn't. As when you young, the first time you truly see a gurl, you canna look proper at her, though she is to be all you ever think on.

But first night in moon's shine. Well.

Christ. Like fire it is. But dull in frost. Frozened. Yet beautiful.

Beautiful.

Once saw a metal forged, was steel. It went go that color, afore the cool-ing starts. But

this, this is tween the heat and the cool. White red. Red sil-ver. How can I say?

The shape.

Well.

I have see a lizard once. Yet this now not really like this lizard, which was only small, a kind creature.

And this ain't kind. Nor small.

Well.

How can I say?

Well, let me say, first time I fuck a gurl, when I have seen her nakd, and there she is, my heart in my throat she so sweet and so.

There's no word.

And this, neither no word.

And still I must try explain.

Up in the column of the narrer ice the shape do stood, and it have the body of a lizard among the giant kind. The backbone is curving, flex like a curl of rope. And all covered with scale is it, like a great fish. And it is have wings. The wings are more like they of the butterfly. But tough, the wings, tough as sails, and have a pattern, but this like the kind of written book I canna read, the pattern. And it has legs, and forelegs like long arms, and on them like hands, both on the feet and the front feet, hands. And the hands do have to be with claws. Each claw look to be length my forearm. Then there is long neck, and the head.

What is head of it? Like horse, a little. But not like horse. No, like the lean head of race dog, long, and thin. It with two ears, set back. Ears are like dog ears. And the shut eyes like lizard's eys.

I don't know what it is, this thing, in the ice. But I say to you, long afore I see this, I've look in some books. What books say want go hard for me, and the picture too, and yet, piece by piece, sometime I will read then. This name I bring out. Dragon.

Dragon, dull red as burnt fire and cloved over frost white, wings spread like a moth against a lighted candle, and the eys shut. Shut eyes. No mov-ing. Still like dead. Dragon. Dragon.

This we tow.

The weather it held, with the sea in pleats and slow, and soft gray sky that has sun like a lemon slice, and by night a moon like a ghost.

Porpus teem through water, wet slick speckle, like cats. Then is later, and the packs of the flat ice drifting by, and above over us black head tarna flying.

All this while the dragon coil in the berg. No moving.

The twenty feet ice of the berg glister but never cracks. Each dayup, Corgen comes out

with gun, and look over the berg ice, check.

I try say to him about the dragon in the ice.

Corgen won't say back. Three times I try. Third time he slap me hard in the mouth so down I fall. Beau pulls me away, but as I not any drink in me, I feel no will ter do nothing on this, only sad, like as when I child.

Nights though, he, me, and Beau we eat in the cabin. The wodka is still plenty. The guys from the tramper, they brung over a lot. Good best stuff, best than any ever drunk. Only tastes bit of kerosene, Corgen say. Who care for that? They drink, try to make me, laugh at me that I won't.

They sing some nights. So I with them.

In the ice it never moving. Eyes shut.

I think what eyes did it had behind the close, hot metal color lids. Were they like fire? Was fire what it breathed as the book say?

As Corgen won't speak, I ask of Beau, what did the officers on the oth-er ship say of the dragon, when first they make Corgen and he to see it.

—They come out talk of prehistry, say Beau. —Say this like elephant thing in Rus, that was trapt in hard old ice. This one some kind of dynosar. But I see them dead dynosars in a show once. This out there nothing like them.

—Is it died? I say.

—For Christ, Pete, how fuck am I go to know? Looks well dead to me.

But the one who dies around then is Bacherly. I find him, as we was getting well up north, toward the world's top.

Dense white mist that day, and we to go very slowly cos for of the ice drifts, which you hear grunt and creak and squeak now near, and now far off, but never see till close. And I go down with mess of meatpotato, and Bacherly is there and he's dead, with a red smear on chin.

Corgen come and kicks him to wake up. Bacherly don't take notice. We havta put him over side, and Ando say the prayer.

Some of the others have gutache too. But Corgen say they are all time drunken and that this is why, can't hold Rus wodka, it too good for them.

Then he say soft to me, —Or it that thing in there.

Meaning the dragon in the ice.

He say, —Some shitten disease carry on it. Those guys from the mili-tary, they jaw on, say too cold for any germ. How the fuck they knows? Couldna wait to get rid, and we the fuckfools to do muck work for them.

The stillness is like a dream.

When mist melts, I see three storms, three, four mile off north and east, boiling. But these never come up with Corgen's bucket. As if afraid to.

Tward nothard, that a strange place. Never had I been up so high. A terrible white place, with islands of ice that look to anchor, so steady they are stuck on the water. And the land what seem ter go to want draw near, white land, bare as a cracked china plate, but it's ice. And now we was to see animals about, the lolling seals and walrus. One time there is two like swords flash, fish with horns that fight in the sea. —Narhl, say Corgen.

He was been here afore and know such beasts.

We is both to forard, us, when he tell me that. He never at back of ship, save when at helm, or when he checks the berg.

We be have long days on this travel. I forgotten how many.

Then one day, just like that one I describe, Corgen and I is by the rail, when he lean over, and I hear he's throw up. When back he come, he have a smear of red on his lip.

One or two other of his men are sick now days on days, and all the rest belly rotten. Only I am not.

—Pete, Corgen say. —You never taste that filthy Rus piss muck, say you never?

—The wodka? Nar, Corgen. I swore I'd never, after Chalsapila.

—Thanks Christ, say Corgen. —Listen now, it's gotten be medcin in.

—What medcin?

—Don't you be bludy fool. What medcin ya think? To fuckkill us all. Govment do it. We haul thing up here, and all while drinken, and it gets hold. No bludy nine hundred dolla for us, but poisoned. Done for, the boatload ofn us.

I start to cry. He hits me. Then we hug hard, like long ago.

—Why they do it? I say.

—To sew up our mouths. Christ know they want that thing us be to tow kept safe and froze and none to find.

I turn my head, canna help that, look all the way of the ship, to where the ghostly berg she float there still on her cables, as if she follow us. And in the yeller blubber white amba of the ice, the dragon not moving, curven, and I see.

—Corgen, I say. —Corgen

—Now, say Corgen. —Listen close. The men and I are up to go the cabin. Have a final drunk of the piss muck, feel good one last, then I use the gun. Cap'n's job. And me the last.

—Christ. Nar, nar. We lay over tward the west, some settled place, get help.

—Too late, Peter. And beside, what to do of that in some settled place? That lizard. No, we go in cabin, we already done for. You'll hear some shots is all. Soon done. Leave it be. We two do say our god's bye here. Ye never had a stomache for a ruckus. Keep yor head, you'll make shore. Leave bludy ship. Take the boat. Leave ship and us and the thing. Sea is

very calm and slow. You will make ter shore.

I never have words. Now neither, they don't come. He wring me in his arms, and then go, and the other men appearing and they go after, some even lifting a hand to me, and Beau give me a sorry grin, as they are leav-ing like for a new ship. The cabin door shuts.

I stand alone.

Above, over I the sails swing and sigh, and every side the pack ice grind in the waves. There's shout and cussing and a can thrown behind the door which make it to shake.

I stand alone till and I hear the shots. One, two, three. Then a bit. Then four. Which is he, my brother.

I set down on the planks and cry, all the ice and water and empty around me. He were never my brother in blood. Ma's son she allays beat, and I only her died brother's boy she beat too, but never me so hard and cruel as he. Hated me he shoulda. Never done that. My brother, Corgen.

The dark by this time is to be coming, and never is quite dark, nor never now quite day. But I go down to ship's end, and stare at the dragon in the ice. And I saw as I had when I look ahind just before Corgen go in to die, that its eys are have come open, open wide.

Its eyes not like fire, no, they look like an old piece silver I once see in a church, pale but tarnish of black, and shine behind.

Very slow, slow as think, they seem to move. The rest dead still, no breath, no trembler of leg or head. But just these eyes move this and that way.

All Corgen and crew be stark dead, they, and this have awaken sure, and not dead, there alive in the white amba of the ice.

And then its eyes look down, at me, so far down on the planks of the ship. The eys are to stare. And I know it have never, in all the time of its living days afore seen a thing like I am. As I, in all my living, never saw a thing like it but in a book I proper couldna read.

All around the dark drop like snow.

When I have the things set right, I beginning what now I must.

So long a great while, the steel tooth works on the cabling, and the green sparks fly. I look up and they are reflect like thoughts in the old sil-ver of the dragon's eyes.

All night I am take to cut the cords that bind the berg to the stern of Corgen's ship.

The big heat of cutting make me sweat, and make too the berg true sweat, and near the half dawn time, I see there are a crack all up the crystal ice, all splintery and furred white, and it leak, drip, drip, away in the cold area.

The dragon watch all that.

No moving, but only the eys.

When part of the sky lift to the east, last of the iron cords smokes and screams off and crash down in the water. The berg shudder. There is wind now, blow fierce straight out of the sun, and drive Corgen's bucket over to port, to the west, and maybe we are to go to smash on the ice there. But I look back, and I see the berg drift now, free, and how the heat from the cutting I was made get ice to run down, and the sun catch on these flows, and sudden a chunk of the old, old ice fall out and into the water.

Then was a horrible circling tide that hides up in the ice packs, and hauls ship away, with the wind too bending her, so she lie to her side, and the great berg go smaller and smaller. But I think of its eyes.

I go down in hold, where Bacherly died the first. I cover up me in his blude-mark blankets and sleep, for there's now no more of any kind I can be to do.

She run in, time later, on Spalt Island, where the codfishers have a camp town of huts, and they come take me from the ship to their fires. Later we bury my brother and his men in the deep inland snow. An old man he say words over them from the Bible. A young woman of the older peoples here, with hair black as oil, she rubs my hands in her square, hot, fat hands, to bring me warm. She's kind, the black haired woman.

The fishers go out and come in again in their boats with the nets thrash-ing with the codfish. But never have they to say that they see any odd thing.

Berg must of drift north and froze, or away again to south, or west or east, and burst like a frost glass on sharp wall of sun. Perhaps and too, what is in there maybe allays was dead, under the ice, its eyes only to open as sometimes a dead man's will, or he make groan or sigh, even though he dead as stone when you check him, but it's as you picken him up the final air go out. The men here say they have seen like this in shark. And too, it is like dead Beau done, yet he is rotten. But Corgen never did.

Long while since, I am on this island.

I am walking out to the land's edge, where ice thick as twenty feet. Stand there, I, and see the sky and the water. I think and think, but no word comes. Can such thing as a dragon come back from so far past? Such a thing as that, so pale metal red, so long shut in its prison of frost glass, just the sparks of the cutting free and the Artie sun's shine to warm it, just the tides to push it here or there, back into the cold on the world's roof, or down into the melt of the thaw. Or down otherways under the top of the sea.

The black haired woman kind to me, like they kind to the dead here. Ask no question.

I think all hour of all day. And night when I wait for to go sleep. Of Cor-gen shut in the snow and dragon in the berg, and of that in me that is me, clove in the ice, gone out like a match. Forever and tomorrow and forever.

The black hair woman kind.

—*from an idea by John Kaiine*

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