

# New Fiction by Colin W. Sargent: Gotwit's End



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A flock of birds with glider wingspans and needle beaks rose from the waves as they began their 7,000-mile journey to the Arctic Circle. Banking away from New Zealand toward the heavens, they had no idea what was in store for them. Nature just whispered it was time to go.

*You sleep in the lonely air without ever landing but for a few moments at a lost island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, unseen and unheralded.*

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BY THE TIME the sun thought about rising, I'd already touched everything that could betray us. The flashlight jittered in my hand like a nervous thought—across the instruments, the synch shaft, the Teflon-coated rotor blades, the hidden places where helicopters decide whether to love you back. The Sea Knight waited, patient and enormous, breathing quietly to herself. She always knew more than we did.

We lifted from the ship in darkness, the sea loosening its grip with reluctance, and climbed to 1,000 feet over Diego Garcia: 1,000 miles south of India, 2,200 miles east of Tanzania, 1,300 miles northeast of Mauritius, 2,900 miles northwest of Australia. The island curved below us like a bare shoulder. It had once been a leper colony, which felt right. Certain places keep only the afflicted.

I was the sandbag—the extra weight, the junior guy, the one who watches too closely because he has nothing else to do. I studied each gauge the way an old man studies soup, suspicious

of pleasure. Something was wrong with the aircraft. Or with me. The distinction mattered more than regulations allowed.

The Lieutenant flew with his window open and his gloves off, as if danger were a matter of ventilation.

“Turns are good.”

He signed the yellow form with the finality of a man who believes in himself. He always did.

He was dashing in that careless way—tall, slack, ruined slightly by time and by a wife who’d left him during a tour that lasted three years too long. Since our helo detachment’s mission included distributing mail, he’d even had to deliver his own divorce papers to himself. Good God. Everyone said he was a great pilot and a good man. Everyone except the woman who’d learned him up close. Everyone said he was a great pilot and a good man. Everyone except the woman who’d learned him up close.

He pushed us faster than necessary and, without explanation, dipped the cyclic toward the dark side of the island.

“Just curious,” he said.

Coconut palms crowded the water below, leaning inward as if gossiping. We dropped to fifty feet. The air rushed in cool and intimate, lifting the sweat from my skin. Our rotors bent the palms. Sand rose in invisible spirals. The island seemed to inhale us.

Numinous, I thought. The word came uninvited.

“This junk’s choking our intakes.” I was suddenly an expert, though I was nobody’s NATOPS check pilot. Titles matter when fear is aroused. A heartbeat later, in my windscreen, I was eye to eye with a creature from another universe. It looked right into my soul. Before I could react, it slammed with a thud and fell, leaving a smear. A cloak of dark wings

followed. "What was that?"

"First bird strike?"

The Lieutenant gestured toward the fronds of the bending palm trees toward a green glass float lodged in the canopy—a blown-glass sphere, heavy and luminous, caught in netting like a secret kept too long. How in blazes had he even seen it? Others glittered nearby, trophies thrown up by storms older than any of us.

"We'll take that one," he said.

The hoist whined. Lewis descended, young and golden and eager, hitting the sand running. He climbed the wrong tree with athletic joy, reaching for the wrong prize.

The Lieutenant's patience broke like a cheap wave. He threw his kneeboard, cursed under his breath, and then—astonishingly—unplugged his radio. Silence rushed in, obscene and total.

He looked at me once, calmly, and then he left the cockpit.

Jumped.

Lowered himself on the 600-pound test cable and left it dangling.

The helicopter trembled in my hands, eighty-five feet of metallic desire and consequence hovering over a forest that would never testify. Sand fed the engines. The warning lights flirted with catastrophe. I thought, not without pleasure, that I was alone in this machine in a way men no longer are.

It was against Navy regulations. A Sea Knight must never be flown by just one pilot—each cockpit seat commands a deadly separate view. I imagined the inquiry: the long green table, the glass of water, the Lieutenant slamming his hand down, his wings of gold under his palm. I imagined leaving them on the

beach, inventing a failure elegant enough to be believed. Daylight crept in. So did resolve.

But nothing happened.

The logbook later said no incident. It always does. I was given the second-best float.

Up close the emerald orb was heavy and honest, nearly two feet across, bubbles in its hand-blown glass. It was caught in its net the way a good fish is caught—without tricks and without mercy. The rope was gray and worn, knotted by hands that had known salt and sun. I looked closer at the sphere, so thick and old, dark green like deep water, not the bright green of hope but the green of endurance. It had been knocked and scarred, rolled and carried, and it bore that without complaint. Light slid across its surface the way it does on calm water at dawn, briefly, and then is gone.

The sea had worked on it and found it worthy.

“It’s Japanese,” someone said later. “Pre-war, made from recycled saki bottles. When typhoons rip them free, they cross the whole Pacific. Once one made it to Norway.”

I held it and felt, briefly, like something had made the journey intact.

Some things survive because they know what they’re for.

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AFTER THE DEPLOYMENT, I could sum up my life in three sentences. I’d married my one and only love. I’d enjoyed good health. And I’d moved three times. My Navy souvenirs remained packed in the basement in their last resting place behind the electric piano, which had suffered some water damage during a storm.

New Year’s Eve we lost power, and I went downstairs to check

the circuit breakers. There was the box, standing in my way, and as I moved it I realized it was time to deal with it. Why had I let this become a monkey's paw?

At the top of the box was my dress uniform and flight jacket, as carefully preserved as any wedding dress. Below them was a stack of yellowed flight manuals and a paraline plotter.

But no fishnet ball.

Had it been stolen during one of the moves, or had I been fooling myself all along and never really had it?

That night, in my restless sleep, I witnessed the green glass sphere softly plotting a way to break free, rolling on the waves. Only it became Lieutenant Larry's grinning head, eyes rolled back, with a prognathic grimace.

Why had the Lieutenant done something in peacetime that was prohibited even in wartime? It came to me. At that hidden moment, with no one of any importance watching, in the loneliest place on Earth, the Lieutenant just had to win something.

So now the ball is gone, undocumented and unwatched. Free. It's really so extraordinary. If you run into it, avoid it at all costs. I've let it go.