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Opening Extract from...

The Five Greatest Warriors

Written by Matthew Reilly

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THE FIVE GREATEST WARRIORS

Matthew Reilly



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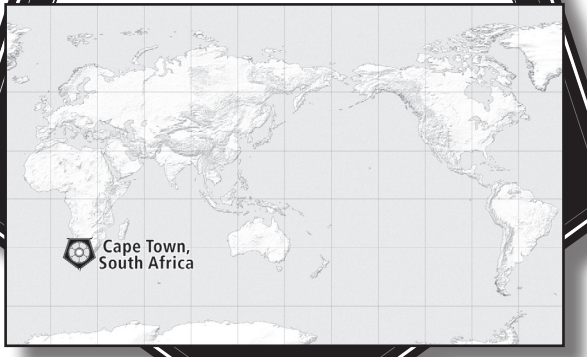
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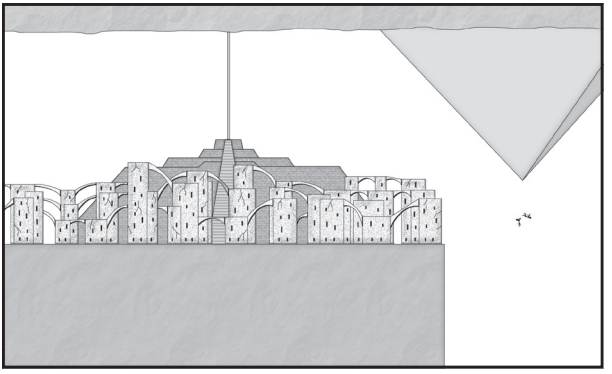
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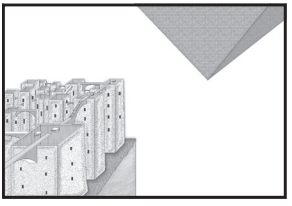
SOUTH AFRICA

17 DECEMBER, 2007

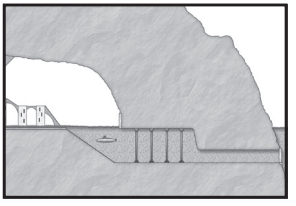
THE DAY OF THE SECOND DEADLINE



THE SECOND VERTEX



THE CITY AND THE PYRAMID



THE ENTRANCE TUNNEL



THE SECOND VERTEX
BENEATH THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE
SOUTH AFRICA
17 DECEMBER, 2007, 0325 HOURS

Jack West fell.

Fast.

Down into the black abyss beneath the inverted pyramid that was the Second Vertex.

As he plummeted into the darkness, Jack looked up to see the gigantic pyramid receding into the distance, getting smaller and smaller, the jagged walls of the abyss crowding in around it.

Falling through the air beside him was Switchblade, the Japanese–American US Marine who moments earlier had betrayed Wolf and almost derailed his plan to insert the Second Pillar in its rightful place at the peak of the pyramid. It turned out that Switchblade's Japanese blood was more important to him than his American upbringing.

But after a last-ditch swing from Jack and a desperate struggle above the abyss, Jack had jammed the Pillar in place just as the two of them had dropped from the upside-down peak and commenced their fall into the bottomless darkness.

The rocky walls of the abyss rushed past Jack in a blur of speed. He fell with Switchblade in a tumbling ungainly way, their limbs still awkwardly entwined.

As they plummeted, Switchblade punched and

scratched and lashed out at Jack, before grabbing his shirt and glaring at him with baleful eyes, screaming above the wind, '*You!* You did this! At least I know you'll die with me!'

Jack parried away the crazed Marine's blows as they fell.

'No, I won't . . .' he said grimly as he suddenly kicked Switchblade square in the chest, pushing himself away from the suicidal Marine – at the same time, grabbing something from a holster on Switchblade's back, something that every Force Recon Marine carried.

His Maghook.

Switchblade saw the device in Jack's hands and his eyes widened in horror. He tried to grab it, but now Jack was out of his reach.

'No! *No!!*'

Still falling, Jack pivoted in the air, turning his back on Switchblade to face the wall of the abyss.

He fired the Maghook.

Whump!

The high-tech grappling hook flew out from its gun-like launcher, its metal claws snapping outward as it did so, its 150-foot-long reinforced nylon cable wobbling like a tail behind it.

The grappling hook's claws hit the wall of the abyss, scraped against it, searching for a purchase before – *whack!* – they found an uneven section of rock and caught – and instantly Jack's cable went taut – and his fall was abruptly and violently arrested and it took all his might to keep a grip on the Maghook's launcher.

But hold on he did and as he swung in toward the vertical wall of the abyss, the last thing he saw behind him

was the shocked, furious, powerless, horrified and *beaten* look on Switchblade's face as he fell into black nothingness, his evil mission a failure – a failure that was multiplied a hundredfold by the realisation that Jack West had got the better of him with one of his own weapons and that he was now going to die alone.

Jack swung into the wall of the abyss with a colossal thump that almost dislocated his left shoulder.

Silence.

For a moment, Jack hung there from the cable of Switchblade's Maghook, dangling from the rocky vertical wall of the great abyss, high above the centre of the world and at least a thousand feet below the upside-down bronze pyramid of the Vertex. Despite its immense size, it now looked positively tiny.

Closing his eyes, Jack exhaled the biggest sigh of relief of his life.

'What the *hell* were you thinking, Jack?' he whispered to himself, catching his breath, letting the adrenalin rush subside.

A flutter of feathers made him spin and suddenly a small brown peregrine falcon alighted on his shoulder.

Horus.

His faithful bird pecked affectionately at his ear, nuzzling him.

Jack smiled wearily. 'Thanks, bird. I'm glad I survived, too.'

Distant shouts from up in the Vertex made him look upward – Wolf's people must have noticed that the Pillar had been set in place and were now sending men to get it.

Jack sighed. He could never hope to climb back up in

time to catch them, let alone stop them. He might have saved the world and their lives *and* killed the traitor in their midst, but now the bad guys were going to get the booty: the Second Pillar's reward, the mysterious concept known only as *heat*.

But there was nothing Jack could do about that now.

He turned to Horus. 'You coming?'

And with that, he gazed up at the pyramid high above him and after a deep breath, reeled in the Maghook, grabbed a handhold on the rough surface of the abyss's wall, and began the long climb upward.

It took Jack almost an hour to scale the wall of the abyss – by firing the Maghook up it and then climbing up the hook's cable one hundred and fifty feet at a time.

It was slow going, since the rocky wall was largely sheer and slick, and sometimes the grappling hook found no purchase at all and just fell back down towards Jack.

But after about fifty minutes of such climbing, Jack slid over the edge of a stone rail and lay on his back on the precipice, his chest heaving, sucking in air. Horus landed lightly beside him.

When Jack sat up, he saw the magnificent underground city constructed in supplication to the inverted pyramid, with its hollow towers, its streets of inky black liquid and, through the forest of bridges and towers, the massive ziggurat rising in its centre; the whole scene lit by Wolf's dying amber flares.

Of course, the entire supercavern was now deserted, Wolf's force having long since departed.

Also gone, Jack noted sadly, were his companions, the Adamson twins and the Sea Ranger. Jack imagined that, thinking him dead, they had rightly hurried down the long underwater passageway that led back to the open

ocean in the Sea Ranger's submarine –

Movement.

Jack spun, his eyes focusing on the summit of the ziggurat, just visible between all the towers.

'Oh my God . . .' he breathed, registering who it was.

There, sitting totally alone on top of the mighty ziggurat, his head bowed, one of his arms in a sling, was a small boy, his daughter's best friend, Alby Calvin.

Left alone in this enormous space, with his wounded shoulder aching and with Jack West Jr's battered FDNY fireman's helmet sitting in his lap, Alby had given up all hope of escape and was waiting for the last flares to fizzle out, when he heard the shouting voice.

'*Alby! Albeeee!*'

He snapped to look up – fresh tears still running down his cheeks – to see a tiny figure over by the edge of the abyss waving his arms.

Jack.

Alby's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

Jack negotiated his way across the underground mini-metropolis, over to the central ziggurat, using Wolf's plank bridges where he could and swinging across the wider thoroughfares with the Maghook where he had to.

The black ooze that filled the city's streets appeared to be a thick mud-like substance – semi-liquid and goopy. If you fell into it, you didn't get out.

As he traversed the avenues, he tried his radio. 'Sea Ranger, come in? Do you read me?'

No reply.

His small handheld radio didn't have the signal strength to reach the Sea Ranger in his submarine.

Moving in his unorthodox way, Jack hurried across the underground city.

At last, he came to the base of the ziggurat and bounded up its stairs, arriving at the roof, where he slid to Alby's side and embraced him as if he were his own son.

Likewise, Alby hurled his good arm around Jack, closing his eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks.

'I thought I was going to die here, by myself in the dark . . .' he whimpered.

'I wouldn't let that happen, Alby.' Jack released the boy from his bearhug. 'You're too good a friend to Lily . . . and to me. Plus, your mother would absolutely kill me.'

Alby stared at him. 'You just fell into a chasm with a guy who was trying to kill everyone in the whole world and you're afraid of my mom?'

'Hell yeah. When it comes to your well-being, your mom's scary.'

Alby smiled at that. Then he lifted Jack's fireman's helmet from his lap and offered it to Jack. 'I think this belongs to you.'

Jack took it, and placed it on his head, pulling the chin-strap tight. Just putting it on made him look and feel whole again. 'Thanks. I've been missing that.'

He nodded at Alby's sling. 'So what happened to you?'

'I got shot.'

'Jesus Christ, your mom's really gonna kill me. By who?'

'By that guy who fell into the chasm with you. Back in Africa, in the Neetha kingdom.'

'Maybe there is justice in the world,' Jack said. 'Come on, little buddy, this ain't over yet, we gotta move. We have

to catch up with the Sea Ranger and the twins.'

He hefted Alby to his feet.

'How are we going to do that?' Alby asked.

'The old-fashioned way,' Jack said.

Jack and Alby hustled back across the city, heading for the north-east harbour, racing over bridges or swinging – with Alby piggybacking on Jack's back.

After twenty minutes of this kind of travel, they came to the hill of stone steps that descended into the enclosed harbour there.

'I just hope they haven't cleared the tunnel and got to the open sea yet,' Jack said, pulling off his helmet and stepping knee-deep into the water.

Then he began banging the metal helmet against the first stone step beneath the waterline.

Dull *clangs* rang out. Three short ones, three long ones, then three short ones again.

Morse code, Alby realised.

Jack clanged the helmet against the stone some more, punching out another code.

'Let's hope the sonar operator knows his Morse,' he said.

'How will they know it's you?' Alby said. 'They might think it's a trap, that it's Wolf trying to bring them back.'

'I'm signalling: "s.o.s. COWBOYS COME BACK." The twins only just got their nicknames, nicknames Wolf can't possibly know.'

'How will you know if they've heard you?'

Jack sat down on the top step, holding his helmet limply in his hand. 'I can't know. All we can do now is wait and hope they haven't already gone out of range.'

*

Jack and Alby waited, sitting on the top step of the hill of stairs rising out of the ancient walled harbour, in the dying yellow light of Wolf's flares.

The shadows lengthened as the flares began to sink and fizzle out. The majestic underground city and the pyramid lording over it, having existed in darkness for so many centuries, were about to be plunged back into blackness.

And as the last flare began to flicker and die, Jack put his arm around Alby. 'I'm sorry, kid.'

The flare went out.

Darkness engulfed them.