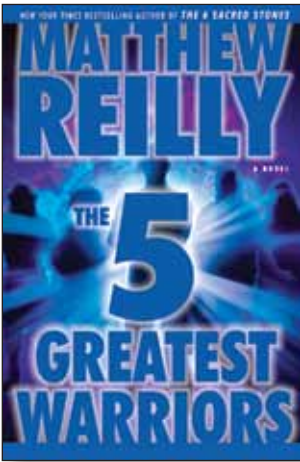


# From *The 5 Greatest Warriors* by Matthew Reilly

The Second Vertex  
Beneath the Cape of Good Hope  
South Africa  
December 17, 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 gunlike 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 realization 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 center 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 adrenaline 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.

Jack smiled wearily but genuinely. “Thanks, bird. I'm glad I survived, too.”

Distant shouts from up in the Vertex made him look up -- 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.