

A SPECIAL
JACK WEST JR SHORT STORY

MATTHEW REILLY

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AND THE
CHINESE SPLASHDOWN



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I knew I was alone in a way that no earthling has ever been before.

- Astronaut Michael Collins, who had to remain in the Command Module circling the Moon while Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on it.

'The moon landing?' Mae's eyes narrowed. 'It *was* real, wasn't it?'

'Absolutely. And also very necessary,' Hades added enigmatically. 'The fourth landing was the important one.'

- From: *The Three Secret Cities* by Matthew Reilly (Macmillan, Sydney, 2018)

**After Jack West Jr found the
SEVEN ANCIENT WONDERS,
rebuilt the Machine with
THE SIX SACRED STONES
and was recognised as one of
THE FIVE GREATEST WARRIORS,
he stepped away from the world for several years.**

**During that time,
before he won in the Great Games held by
THE FOUR LEGENDARY KINGDOMS
and rediscovered
THE THREE SECRET CITIES,
Jack went on another mission.**

**A mission that would bring him unwittingly close
to the Trial of the Mountains...**

THE ZOMBIE SATELLITE HUNTER

Great Sandy Desert

Northwestern Australia

Sometime in 2006

In the year or so after Jack West Jr found the seven wonders of the ancient world and was living peacefully on his farm in the remote northwest corner of Australia – out past the abandoned desert towns of Simpson’s Crossing and Death Valley – he had exactly one neighbour.

Crazy old Wally Ferguson.

No-one else lived in those parts.

The area was hot, arid and about as far from the world as you could get. Not many people cared to live in such a place.

Well, no-one except for Jack and Wally Ferguson.

Jack had a soft spot for old Wally.

He was one of those ‘Only in Australia’ guys. Pushing sixty, he was gruff and overweight, with a pot belly and hairy shoulders. He was also prone to wearing blue singlets and shorts.

‘He’s also as honest as the day is long,’ Jack told Lily as they drove out to see Wally one day in late 2006. ‘I like him.’

‘He smells funny,’ Lily said. She was nine at the time.

‘Regardless of how he smells, he’s actually a brilliant man. Back when he was younger, Wally was an astronomer at the University of South Australia. But then his wife died and Wally kinda had a nervous breakdown and he was never really the same. So he came out here. He’s the only guy who lives in Simpson’s Crossing anymore. But he still has his telescopes and his radio gear—which he built himself—always pointed up at the sky.’

‘He’s not searching for aliens, is he?’ Lily said. ‘Is Mr Ferguson nuts?’

Jack laughed. ‘No, he’s not nuts and he’s not searching for aliens. What he *is* searching for—listening for, actually—is very interesting. He’s looking for zombie satellites.’

‘Zombie satellites?’

‘A zombie satellite is an old satellite—launched many years ago, usually by America or the old Soviet Union—that has run out of batteries and turned off. Only it’s still up there, just sweeping around the Earth, dead, but still in orbit. Ergo, zombie.’

‘Wally uses his telescopes and radio antennas to find them and he posts his findings on astronomical noticeboards. He’s made a few fantastic finds over the years, including three old American spy satellites that, while officially designated in the 1990s as dead, were *still* working. They were still emitting encrypted signals long after they shouldn’t have been. He informed the American government and they weren’t very happy about it at all. He got a tax audit the next year which kind of fuelled his paranoid tendencies.’

Jack smiled. ‘I like old Wally. He’s an odd duck, for sure, a bit of a dreamer. But the world’s a better place with him in it, which is why I like to check on him from time to time. Be a good neighbour.’

Of course, Wally had been delighted to see them—‘Jack! Little Lily! Sit down! Lemme get you both a cuppa!’—and they’d stayed with him all afternoon.

‘Say, Lily,’ Wally said at one point, ‘do you like classical music?’

Lily screwed up her nose. ‘You mean, like, Bach and Beethoven?’

‘Yeah.’

‘No, not really. It’s kinda old and stuffy. I prefer pop music.’

Wally looked horrified. ‘Now, love, I reckon you just haven’t heard the *right* classical music, is all.’

He heaved his big beer gut from his chair and waddled over to a collection of vinyl records on a shelf, picked one and placed it on an old-school turntable.

The music began playing. The famous first notes of Tchaikovsky’s ‘Piano Concerto No.1’.

Baa-bum-bum-bum.

Baa-bum-bum-bum.

...only to suddenly be replaced by a series of boppy synthesised drumbeats.

Jack smiled to himself as he recognised the tune.

It wasn't exactly what professors at highbrow conservatories of music taught as 'classical'. But then...

Wally sat down beside Lily and with a grin a mile wide, started enthusiastically tapping his foot and banging his hand on his thigh in time to the music.

'Isn't it great?' he said, raising his voice.

To her credit, Lily listened...

...and she started bobbing her head, too.

Wally was delighted. 'See! You just haven't listened to the *right* classical music. This track, Lily my girl, is called "Hooked on Classics" and it's a dead-set ripper in the world of classical music. You won't find a better tune.'

Jack was well aware of the tune.

With its cheerful mix of catchy synth and famous orchestral music, 'Hooked on Classics' had been a surprise hit in the early 1980s, climbing into the top ten on popular music charts all over the world alongside the likes of Olivia Newton-John's 'Physical' and Soft Cell's 'Tainted Love'.

Of course, music snobs decried it. But like it or not, 'Hooked on Classics' had introduced a whole generation of young people to classical music, evidently including Wally Ferguson.

After a time, Lily went to play outside and Jack and Wally chatted about his astronomical observations.

‘I hear more and more Chinese signals,’ Wally reported. ‘China is sending all kinds of satellites up into orbit these days. A lot of them are emitting signals that are seriously encrypted, too.’

‘Good to know,’ Jack said as he got up to leave. ‘Thanks for the tea, Wally. We’ll come by again soon.’

A year later, in December 2007, early one morning, Wally would turn his telescope southward and watch—both curious and alarmed—as hundreds of Chinese paratroopers floated down from the sky in the direction of Jack’s farm.

The radio had said it was an exercise, but Wally wasn’t so sure.

But then, shortly after the paratroopers had landed out that way, Wally saw Jack’s big black plane take off and fly away to the northwest, so he figured Jack was fine.

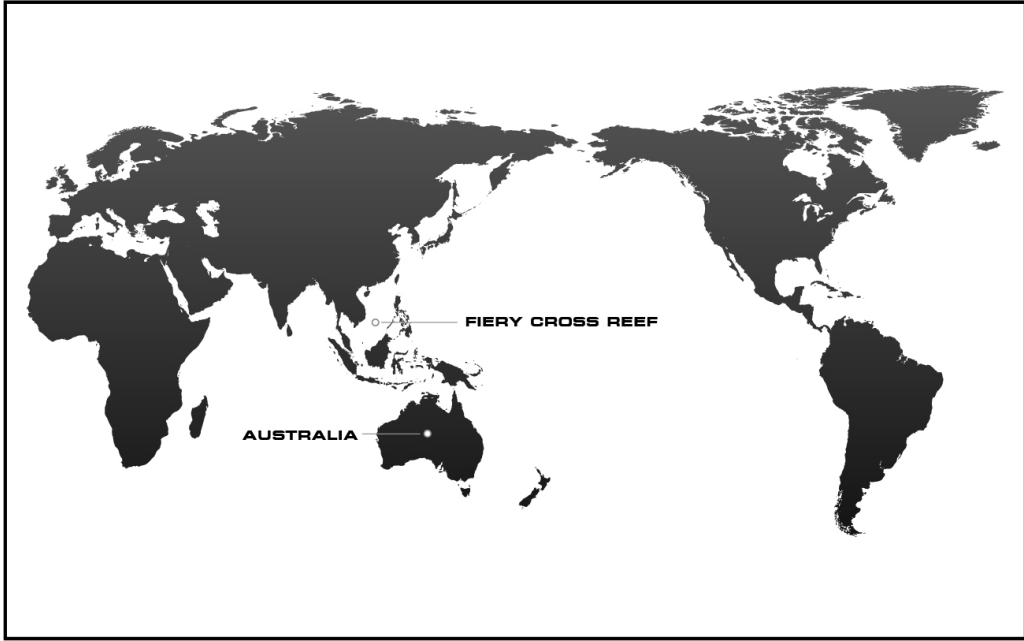
A few months after that, Jack returned, and for some reason took all his stuff from his farm and moved to another one in the Simpson Desert.

Before he left, he stopped by to see Wally and Wally was grateful for the visit.

Over the next few years, Jack would call him on the phone occasionally, but old Wally was sad to see Jack and his little family go.

He’d enjoyed their visits and nobody else visited him anymore.

NINE YEARS LATER



**FIERY CROSS REEF
SOUTH CHINA SEA**

EYES ONLY: DESTROY AFTER READING

SOURCE: CHINESE STATE SECURITY AGENCY

TRANSLATION: MANDARIN to ENGLISH

VOICE 1: Sir, we have Mr Ferguson in custody.

VOICE 2: Where are you holding him?

VOICE 1: The military airfield on Fiery Cross Reef.

VOICE 2: Did you get his hard drive, too?

VOICE 1: Yes, sir.

VOICE 2: I'm on my way. Before we kill Mr Ferguson, we must know everything that he picked up on his scans and find out if he told anyone. Commence the interrogation. Do not be gentle.

Chinese Military Airfield

Fiery Cross Reef, South China Sea

2016

(A few days before the Great Games)

An elongated thread of bloody spittle stretched from Wally Ferguson's chin down to his blue singlet.

He also had two black eyes and a broken nose.

The previous night, he'd been kidnapped from his remote farm in the Australian desert by a team of masked soldiers who'd whisked him away in a plane.

A four-hour trip on the plane had followed, bringing him here.

He didn't know it, but 'here' was a remote hangar at a military base in the South China Sea.

In the nine years since he'd been neighbours with Jack, old Wally had become even quirkier.

He had embraced the Internet and, using his homemade equipment at his farm, he would listen in on space missions launched by the Americans in Florida, the Europeans in French Guiana and, most of all, the Chinese out of the

Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site on Hainan Island at the top of the South China Sea.

His reports of these missions, which he posted on online forums like Reddit, were widely regarded as the paranoid ravings of a conspiracy theorist who'd read too many science fiction novels.

Now, as Wally sat in that Chinese military base on Fiery Cross Reef, flanked by the six Chinese special forces soldiers who had crossed into Australian sovereign territory to kidnap him, he shook his head in disgust.

First, because you're not paranoid if they really *are* after you.

And second, because he knew why they'd come for him.

The transmission he'd intercepted the previous day.

The one from the Moon.

Wally raised his bloody head toward one of his captors. 'Please, mate, let me go! I'm nobody. I won't tell anyone what I heard, I promise.'

'Quiet,' the lead kidnapper said in English. 'The Sky King himself is coming to interrogate you.'

Sky King? Ferguson frowned. *Who or what was that?*

He looked out the hangar's partially-open doors and saw a chain-link perimeter fence enclosing the airfield. A turquoise tropical sea lay beyond it.

Three Chinese Air Force fighter jets sat on the runway, plus the cargo plane that had brought him here.

In the early dawn light, nothing stirred.

Most of this island was artificial. It was one of several military islands that the Chinese had built in the South China Sea, to the vocal anger of neighbouring countries.

And then, without warning, as Wally watched it, the cargo plane exploded.

One second it was there, the next it was a billowing ball of flames.

And then a small man-shaped figure – a figure that seemed to have wings – streaked across the sky, banked quickly *and swept right into Wally's hangar!*

The winged figure swooped to a halt and Wally saw that it was a man wearing what appeared to be lightweight carbon-fibre wings on his back. The man quickly jettisoned the wings and raised a pair of Glock-19 machine pistols that blazed away ferociously.

He was wearing a fireman's helmet.

It was Wally's old neighbour, Captain Jack West Jr.

First, Jack shot the six Chinese kidnapers, dropping each of them.

Then he blasted open the handcuffs binding Wally's hands and said, 'Hey there, Wal. Long time no see. Heard you might be in some trouble.'

'Jack West!' Wally exclaimed. 'I overheard 'em on my scanner. They were on the frigging Moon.'

'Let's go, Wal. We gotta get you out of here, now.'

'Wait, my hard drive.' Wally raced over to a nearby table where the Chinese kidnapers had placed his 100-terabyte hard drive. He snatched it up. 'This is what they wanted, much more than me.'

'Let's move. We got about thirty seconds before everybody else at this base gets here with a whole lot of guns,' Jack said.

The two of them hurried outside...

...just as twenty guards from the base's main building began converging on the hangar in speeding jeeps and trucks.

Running hard, Jack guided Wally over to one of the fighter jets parked on the tarmac. Reaching it, Jack clambered up its ladder and into the cockpit.

'Come on,' he urged. 'Get in here. On my lap.'

'What are you doing?' Wally asked as he climbed in. 'There's no way you can get this fighter moving before they reach us. It's also a single seater —'

'Just get in!'

Wally clambered into the little cockpit, sat on Jack's lap.

Jack said, 'We're flying out of here. Just not the way you think.'

At that moment, a Chinese army jeep with a huge 20mm cannon mounted on its back skidded to a halt right in front of their jet.

'Uh-oh.' Jack grabbed the jet's control stick, squeezed the trigger and fired a missile from one of its wings at the jeep.

The jeep blew apart.

Next Jack took aim at the other two fighter jets on the tarmac. Two bursts of gunfire and they were blown to pieces, too.

Then another jeep, also equipped with a 20mm machine gun on its back, stopped to the side of their jet and the gunner manning its cannon opened fire.

A barrage of heavy-calibre rounds strafed their fighter jet, raking its side with bullet holes, shattering its canopy just as Jack yanked on the fighter's ejection-seat lever and —

— *whoosh!* —

— the glass canopy was blown clear and like a cork shooting out of a champagne bottle, the ejection seat blasted up into the air above the jet, shooting high into the sky, with Jack and Wally on it.

The ejection seat zoomed upward, reaching the peak of its near-vertical trajectory just as —

— another plane, a black plane, appeared, swooping in low from the east.

It was a sleek Tupolev-144 — Jack's plane, known as the *Sky Warrior*, and flown by his friend, the incomparable Sky Monster. It came thundering in low over the hangars of the island base and, with a colossal boom, roared over the runway with an elasticised capture-cable and hook dangling from its underbelly.

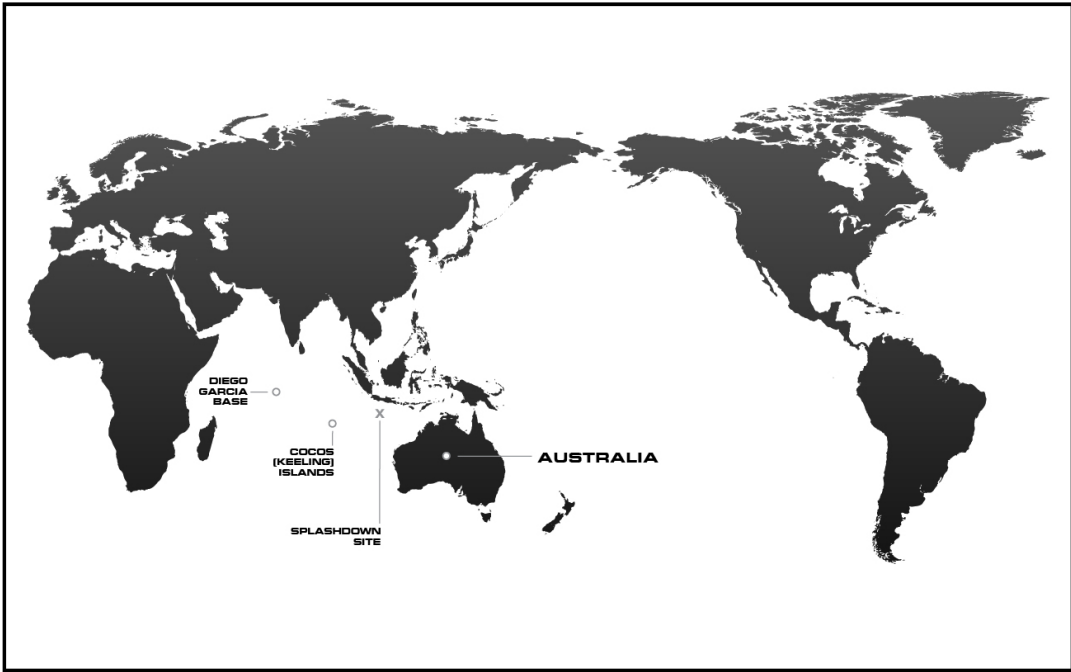
The Tupolev's arrival had been perfectly timed.

Just as the ejection seat reached its zenith and was about to start falling again, the hook suspended from the *Sky Warrior* caught the capture-ring affixed to the top of the seat and Jack and Wally were swept with a stomach-churning lurch away from the base and out over the South China Sea.

Hanging from the capture cable beneath the fleeing *Sky Warrior*, Jack tapped Wally on the shoulder.

'You okay, buddy?' he yelled above the wind.

'Yep!' Wally called back. 'Everybody called me crazy, Jack! They can't call me that anymore! Not after what I intercepted from the surface of the Moon!'



**COCOS (KEELING) ISLANDS
INDIAN OCEAN**

A.S.D. Communications Facility

Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Indian Ocean

One day later

In a dark underground room, his face lit by the glow of communications screens, Jack West listened to the transmission that Wally had intercepted the previous day.

This communications facility was located on the Cocos, or Keeling, Islands in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Through a quirk of history, these islands – like the more controversial Christmas Island nearby – were administered by the Australian government, even though they were a long way from Australia.

Only two of the Cocos Islands are inhabited and this one – coincidentally named West Island – was one of them. It has a crumbling airstrip, a worn-looking town and an underground state-of-the-art listening and direction-finding station run by the elite Australian Signals Directorate featuring, among other things, a Circularly Disposed Dipole Array antenna system.

This was because, while small, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands occupy a very strategic position. In World War II they hosted a vital radio base and today—especially since the rise of China and its activities in Africa—it monitors air, sea and satellite traffic over the Indian Ocean.

With Jack and Wally in the dim space was Jack's good friend, General Eric Abrahamson.

Tall, bespectacled, articulate and with multiple degrees from several top universities, General Abrahamson couldn't have been more different from Wally.

But he had one quality that meant they got along fine: Eric Abrahamson didn't care who you were or where you came from. If you were a decent person who knew their stuff, you were welcome in his company.

He greeted Wally warmly.

Abrahamson was Jack's point-of-contact in the Australian military. Due to the highly unusual nature of Jack's missions over the last twenty years—otherworldly shafts of light lancing down from the sun or dark stars mentioned in ancient texts—Jack required a ranking officer with considerable general knowledge and an open mind. Abrahamson had both.

The three men sat with a radio technician in the Australian Signals Directorate's fortified basement underneath the airfield on West Island.

Jack had arrived there in the *Sky Warrior* overnight with Wally and his hard drive.

Paranoid as he was, Wally had encrypted his hard drive very securely.

It had required a military-grade decryption program to crack it and thus listen to the messages that Wally had intercepted during his astronomical eavesdropping.

In the dark basement, Jack, Abrahamson and Wally listened to it.

They heard two voices speaking in Mandarin, talking about something very unusual: the landing of a remote-controlled vehicle on the surface of the Moon.

Once translated, it went like this:

VOICE 1: Talk to me, Captain. Our master is very keen to know how the mission is going.

VOICE 2: The landing was a complete success. Our unmanned probe touched down on the Sea of Rains within fifty metres of the object. We then drove the lander remotely to the object, collected data and measurements and took photographs of it. The lander is beginning its journey back to Earth now.

VOICE 1: Can't we just transmit the data and the photographs back to Earth?

VOICE 2: No. We can't risk anyone intercepting it. It is far too valuable. We have no choice but to fly the lander back to Earth and pick it up when it splashes down.

VOICE 1: So how long till splashdown?

VOICE 2: Sixteen hours. In sixteen hours, the probe's re-entry vehicle will penetrate the atmosphere and splash down in the Indian Ocean about eight hundred miles south of Sri Lanka. Recovery vessel is en route as we speak.

VOICE 1: What's the name of the recovery ship?

VOICE 2: The *Wuhan-II*. It's a patrol boat with a squad of loyal commandos on it.

VOICE 1:

Call me as soon as they have retrieved that lander. Like I said, our master is most keen to see what is up there on the Moon.

On 20 July 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first man to set foot on the Moon. It is the greatest and most astounding achievement in all of human history.

In the half-century since that day, however, there have only been five more manned missions to the Moon and, to date, only twelve men—all men, no women—have walked on the lunar surface.

There have, however, been many *unmanned* missions to the Moon.

The earliest missions by the US and the Soviets—and more recently by China—involved crashing an unmanned spacecraft directly into the Moon. Later missions performed controlled landings and deployed rovers to collect surface samples which were returned to Earth for later analysis.

All were well-documented and could often be followed in real time by amateur astronomers on Earth.

And China was usually very happy for the world to watch its achievements in space. It yearned more than anything to successfully land people on the Moon, for that would prove that it had finally matched the United States of America in such a sophisticated field.

As such, it was most unusual for China to perform a moon landing *in secret*.

Yet this was exactly what had happened here, Jack saw.

Jack was also intrigued by the mention in the intercept of the Sea of Rains. He knew of this land formation on the Moon because it was where the fourth Apollo mission, *Apollo 15*, had landed. That mission, interestingly, was the first one to bring a lunar rover with it, so that its astronauts could venture farther than ever before from their lander.

With his intercept, poor Wally had discovered a secret Chinese mission to land a remote vehicle on the surface of the Moon right near an old Apollo landing site and collect data, make measurements and take photos of something there, and then return with that information without anyone knowing.

Discovering this had got Wally kidnapped and, if it hadn't been for Jack, would have got him killed.

Hours later, Jack peered at one of the monitors in the darkened comms room.

On it was a real-time satellite video image: a top-down black-and-white view of a Chinese naval patrol boat arriving beside a circular object bobbing on the surface of the Indian Ocean, at a standard Chinese landing site a hundred nautical miles east of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

That circular object was the moon lander.

It had just made a successful re-entry through the Earth's atmosphere and splashed down in the Indian Ocean. Upon hitting the water, the lander had deployed an inflatable collar to keep it afloat. It now looked like a round raft.

As Jack, Wally and Abrahamson watched in silence, the Chinese patrol boat, the *Wuhan-II*, pulled to a halt next to the raft.

Voices over the radio, speaking in Mandarin.

The radio operator translated:

' – coming alongside the lander now.'

' – the vehicle's casing and re-entry heat-shields all appear to be intact.'

There were ten men on the patrol boat. Chinese commandos.

Two of them leaned over the side and extended long hooks to snag the bobbing spacecraft. The lander was brought aboard the boat and placed in a large cube-shaped chamber on its rear deck.

' – placing lander in the quarantine chamber. Checking for microbes and foreign bodies.'

Jack heard a soft hiss as the chamber's lid closed.

Then something beeped approvingly.

' – vehicle is clean.'

A man's voice came in over the tapped line: *'Open it,'* he commanded.

A voice-identification system got to work and some text appeared on a screen.

VOICE IDENTIFIED AS:

GENERAL LAU LIEPING, PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY.

'General Lau,' Abrahamson said. 'One of the most senior officers in the PLA. This goes all the way to the top, Jack.'

'It doesn't sound like he's on the boat,' Jack said. 'Must be directing things from Beijing.'

They saw the leader of the Chinese commando team on the patrol boat open the quarantine chamber's heavy lid, reach in, and then, using an electric screwdriver, open a panel on the space vehicle.

'Zoom in, please,' Jack said softly. The satellite technician in front of him obliged.

The image on the screen zoomed in on the lander.

The Chinese commando leader reached into it.

' – I have the laser rangefinder,' he said.

' – And...?' Lau's voice said anxiously.

' – and the camera...' the commando said.

' – Excellent.'

As Jack watched from overhead, the Chinese commando extracted a box-shaped camera from within the lander.

On the black-and-white screen, Jack couldn't make it out clearly.

'Pull out again, please,' he said.

The image pulled out –

– just as eight dark shapes rose up from the water all around the Chinese patrol boat, unseen by the Chinese commandos on it.

Men in diving suits, moving with supreme stealth, and gripping silenced MP-7 sub-machine guns. They quickly and expertly slipped up the sides of the Chinese boat.

'Oh my Lord...' Abrahamson breathed.

Jack couldn't believe what he was watching.

A covert attack, live in real time.

It took him a moment to deduce where the dark figures had come from, because this Chinese patrol boat was in the open ocean, hundreds of miles from land.

'There's a submarine out there,' Jack breathed in realisation. *'Underneath* that Chinese boat. But how did it get there so quickly?

Like silent ghosts, the eight assassins surrounding the Chinese boat slithered up its sides and sprang onto the rear deck where the Chinese commandos were gathered and, as Jack and the others watched in horror, opened fire.

Jack's jaw dropped as he watched the massacre take place live before his eyes.

The Chinese soldiers were cut down by a hail of gunfire. Some convulsed, others dropped where they stood.

In a few moments, it was over.

The eight attackers now owned the *Wuhan-II* and its precious cargo.

The leader of this stealth force immediately grabbed what they were after: the moon lander and the camera.

Thanks to his facility's incredible listening equipment—which picked up *all* radio signals around the Chinese patrol boat—Jack heard the lead assassin's voice as he spoke into his own radio.

His accent was American, southern, Texan.

'—Base, this is Vulture Six,' he said. 'We have secured the target vessel and eliminated all threats. I have the prize.'

' – Vulture Six, this is Base. Nice work. Scuttle the Chinese boat and use the aerosub to fly your men and the prize back to Diego Garcia. We'll be waiting for you. Mr Caldwell's jet is already on the tarmac. He wants to see those photos.'

A minute later—as Jack continued to watch the extraordinary scene via satellite—something even more extraordinary happened.

A vehicle of a kind he had never seen before rose out of the water beside the Chinese patrol boat.

It looked like a cross between a plane and a submarine.

Seen from above, it had the shape a stingray, with rounded swept-back wings and a long tail. Only unlike a stingray, its tail had small wings on it. Every edge looked rounded, to allow for easy movement through both air and water.

It had two jet engines mounted on its tail, but also a propeller blade built *within* the tail structure. Judging from the shadow, it also had a high dorsal periscope.

'Goddamn...' Jack gasped. 'I heard DARPA was trying to build one of these but I didn't know they actually succeeded.'

'What?' Wally asked. 'What is it?'

'Some people call it a flying submarine, others call it a submersible aircraft. Or, as these guys just put it, an *aerosub*,' Jack said. 'Either way, it's a hell of a vehicle: half-seaplane, half-submarine. A plane that can land on water *and then submerge and travel under the surface*.'

‘Military planners have wished for these for a long time. The Soviets tried for decades to build one, but they could never find a material that was *light* enough to fly yet *strong* enough to withstand the pressure of the ocean’s depths.

‘But DARPA must’ve figured it out. These guys must have flown their aerosub from Diego Garcia to the Chinese splashdown site, landed it *and submerged*, and then they just waited for the moon lander to splash down and the Chinese recovery vehicle to turn up. Then they launched their mid-ocean ambush and killed them.’

The American kill team boarded the aerosub, all eight of them.

As the American leader stepped off the *Wuhan-II*, he tossed a few devices back onto it and a second later, the Chinese patrol boat was rocked by several explosions. Then it sank. Seen from space, it disappeared into a ring of frothing bubbles, never to be seen again.

Abrahamson turned to Jack. ‘Mr Caldwell? Are they talking about Garrett Caldwell, patriarch and leader of the Caldwell Group? One of the richest men in the world?’

‘Yep,’ Jack said. ‘The Caldwell Group is a collection of wealthy American families and businessmen I’ve battled before. Just as their royal European rivals have links to the Catholic Church, the Caldwells have ties with Freemasonry. They’re very well versed in the mysteries of the ancient world.’

‘Looks like America doesn’t want China to get this stuff from the Moon,’ Abrahamson said.

‘You can say that again,’ Jack said. ‘They just used a SEAL team and a super-secret air-capable submarine to take out a Chinese commando team and sink a Chinese naval vessel in order to steal a secret Chinese moon lander. This is big.’

‘Suggested course of action?’ Abrahamson asked.

‘I think we should see what that lander found on the Moon,’ Jack said. ‘It’ll take about two hours for those assassins to get to Diego Garcia in that seaplane. And they have to fly right past us here to get there.’

‘Yes...’ Abrahamson said warily.

‘That lander means something,’ Jack said. ‘And the Caldwell Group went to a lot of trouble to get it. The last time they wanted something this badly, it was connected to the end of the world. I have an idea, and if I can execute it right, we could get that lander and neither the Caldwells nor China will know we have it.’¹

Jack outlined his plan and Abrahamson nodded slowly.

‘That’s absolutely crazy, even by your standards, Jack. Do it.’

¹ THE CALDWELL GROUP. During the Great Games a few days later, (as recounted in *The Four Legendary Kingdoms*) Jack would discover that the Caldwell Group was part of the **Kingdom of the Sea**, one of the four legendary kingdoms that rule the world from the shadows. At the same time, he learned that China was actively trying to take control of another of the four kingdoms, the **Kingdom of the Sky**.

Sixty minutes later, the stingray-shaped 'aerosub' plane containing the team of Navy SEAL assassins and the Chinese moon lander was soaring over the Indian Ocean, heading toward the island base of Diego Garcia.

None of the men on board the aerosub saw the lone figure soar out of the clouds directly above their plane with a pair of gullwings on his back.

Jack.

He swooped hard and fast out of the sky, aided by the compressed-air thrusters on his gullwings. Quick as his gullwings were, normally they wouldn't have been able to keep up with a plane, but the aerosub was a series of compromises and was thus slower than a standard plane of its size.

Soon, Jack was rocketing along only a few feet above the unsuspecting aerosub and its occupants.

As he hit the same speed as the aerosub, Jack reached down and carefully unscrewed a cap on the plane's air pressure system. There was no lock or security feature on the system's external cap, as no-one had ever anticipated someone opening it in flight or deep underwater. Jack quickly attached a small canister to the system and released the canister's contents.

A moment later, after a quick glance inside the moving plane, he lowered himself alongside it and cut through the lock on its right-side hatch with a small handheld blowtorch. Then he yanked open the hatch and clambered inside.

Still wearing his high-altitude facemask, Jack peered around the cabin.

The eight assassins lay slumped in their seats, knocked out by the gas he had pumped into the air pressure system. It wouldn't kill them, but it would knock them out for some time.

Jack quickly grabbed the small moon lander and its camera, and then—after taking some photos of the amazing aerosub's cockpit—reset the plane's automatic landing system.

Then he stepped out of the moving plane, closed the hatch and flew away, back toward the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

Interdiction complete.

An hour later, the aerosub touched down under autopilot on the tranquil central lagoon at Diego Garcia.

Some powerful men were waiting for it.

But when they opened the unusual-looking plane, all they found inside it were eight groggy SEALs and no moon lander or camera.

Back at the underground basement at the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, watched by General Eric Abrahamson and Wally, Jack plugged a cable into the digital camera and tried to download its photos.

It was a difficult task. The Chinese encryption was next level. With the computers they had on the island, Abrahamson was able to decrypt some of the photos, but even then all they got to see were flashing glimpses of some of the photos.

They all seemed to be of the same thing.

An object on the surface of the Moon.

Through slashes of encryption static, Jack stared in amazement at a pedestal of some kind.

It was grey and smooth-sided, oblong in shape. A layer of silver thermal Kapton foil covered its upper surface. It just stood there on the barren grey surface of the

Moon. You could glimpse the Earth in the background, a gorgeous aqua-blue marble hanging in space.

From the laser measurements the lander had taken, the pedestal was about three feet high.

‘That is *not* natural,’ Abrahamson said.

‘It looks like an altar,’ Jack said.

One partially decrypted photo of one of the pedestal’s sides – obscured by static-lines – revealed an image carved into it:



‘What...is that?’ General Abrahamson said slowly.

‘And why is it on the Moon?’ Jack added.

Jack's eyes narrowed. 'Eric. Take all this stuff back to Pine Gap. It's got much better decryption programs that might be able to remove all this static and get us a better look at these photos. It's also the most secure base we have. I'll take Wally back to his home and swing by my farm. I'll come join you in a few days and hopefully we can see these photos a bit better, analyse them more closely and figure out what's going on here.'

'Copy that,' Abrahamson said.

'Hey!' Wally protested. 'Don't I get to see them more closely? I found them.'

'Wally,' Jack said. 'You're lucky to be alive and even luckier that we're letting you see *anything* now. I'm going to drop you home and I suggest you immediately move to a new place that no-one knows about. For our part, Eric and I will forget you were a part of this and have our meeting alone.'

That meeting never happened.

A week later, Jack would visit Abrahamson at Pine Gap...

...to find the high-security base in ruins and the general shot dead.

Then Jack collapsed – drugged by an aerosol – and was himself kidnapped. He would awake inside a cell in the Underworld where he would be forced to compete in the Great Games for the benefit of the Four Legendary Kingdoms.

In the audience watching the Games were all four of the kings, including those of the Sea and Sky Kingdoms. During the Games, the two kings engaged in polite conversation but, curiously, the subject of the Chinese splashdown never came up.

After Jack had dropped off Wally at his home in the desert, Wally had quickly packed up his stuff and moved to new isolated location.

Wally Ferguson – outback loner, zombie satellite hunter, lost soul – remained a quirky figure. His posts on online astronomy noticeboards continued although no-one knew from where.

That said, he did leave one other mark on the world.

He didn't know it, but in the years since he'd seen her, Lily West had become a devoted lover of classical music.

Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Debussy, Schubert, Stravinsky, Brahms: she enjoyed them all and had ever since that afternoon at Wally's farm back in 2006 when old Wally had played 'Hooked on Classics' for her.

THE END

THE MYSTERIOUS ALTAR ON THE MOON

WILL BE EXPLORED FURTHER IN

THE TWO LOST MOUNTAINS