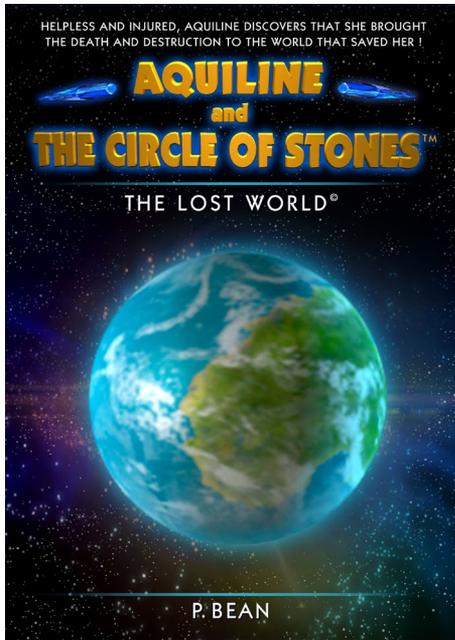


Excerpt from Aquiline and The Circle of Stones: The Lost World



The overlapping songs of morning birds announced the Sun’s imminent appearance, and also pried Dr. Marie’s eyes open. She raised herself on one elbow, immediately wondering how in creation she ended up in the bed. Her head fell back onto the pillow and she quickly dosed off.

In seemingly the next moment, a loud shrill right outside the window jolted her whole body awake. “*Wow . . . now that’s an alarm clock!*” Tes grunted under her breath, then forced a shaky hand toward her cell phone and tapped the touch-screen. She squinted at the fuzzy display. After a couple of hard blinks, a small text message indicated that her fancy phone couldn’t locate a viable service area. She clumsily reached for the ancient clock on the night-stand, and after a confused squint, she threw the covers back, only to release a cold shrill of her own. “Oh my—”

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she announced to the cold morning air. "Haven't these people ever heard of heat!" She quickly reached for her thick slippers, and was glad her mother insisted on packing them. After one more glance toward the night-stand, she released a self-incriminating roll of the eyes. "*You unplugged the noisy thing you dope.*"

Another ear-piercing whistle made her jump toward the single window of her less than spacious quarters. Her heart thumped as a bald eagle glided no more than ten meters above. "*OK, you wonderful creature, you wanted me awake . . . well, I'm awake,*" she softly relayed.

The wild bird circled once and flew right passed her window. Therese felt a strange connection to this beautiful symbol of her native country. The eagle banked sharply, threw out its graceful wings to brake, and landed on top of a tree directly in front of her.

She didn't dare glance away. "*What . . . are . . . you trying to . . . ?*"

The eagle bent its head forward intently and locked eyes with the astonished scientist. Long talons expertly gripped the branch weighing it down, though the bird looked totally in control. A heavy wind gust rustled the eagle's feathered crown, but didn't shake its focus. It began to turn its head in the direction of the volcano, but kept its focus on Therese, then dipped a gesture and completely altered its gaze to the tall mountain for several deliberate moments . . . and turned to again lock eyes with the captivated Human.

An eerie hum nearly made her ears pop, and she swallowed hard to release the pressure. "You . . . want . . . me to get dressed and get over there . . . when the Sun rises?" The question flowed out of her almost hypnotically. Feeling slightly out-of-body, she could only shake her head. "OK, this is weird. It's not like you can answer—"

The bird silenced her by angling its head sharply down almost touching its golden beak to the white feathers ringing its neckline, then straightened and stuck out its proud breast. It leaped off the branch with a tremendous wing thrust, then released a last shrilling call—and was gone.

"I take that as a yes." After an extended sigh of both relief and astonishment, the geophysicist couldn't help but release a chuckle wondering how the past few minutes would be summed up in her field report. She flung her bag on the bed and tried to rub the

tingle from her face. After grabbing the necessary toiletries, she hurried toward the surprisingly warm bathroom, glad that she had showered the night before. In less than five minutes she was ready, already checking her field kit and back-up camera batteries. With a cold breakfast bar sticking half out of her mouth, she closed and double-checked the lock of her motel room door and hurried toward the small motel's main office.

She stopped in her tracks as a distant bird call made her look in the direction of Mt. Shishaldin. Although the unmistakable shrill was of a bald eagle, Therese knew it was—her eagle. “Alright, I’m coming as fast as I can,” she replied. As soon as she pulled the door open, an aroma of freshly brewed coffee welcome her.

“Well,” an older sweet voice announced. “You southerners sure do sleep late.”

Dr. Marie turned her head to both sides but saw there was no one else in the small lobby. “Me? Late? The Sun is barely—”

“You just march over there and sit down. Coffee—light cream. I’ll have your breakfast up in a jiffy.” A short apron-donned Eskimo disappeared behind a corner.

“*Jiffy?*” Dr. Marie softly repeated. “Sorry, I don’t have time for breakfast. Do you have—”

The woman reappeared with a steaming coffee pot and a tall glass of orange juice. “Nonsense, you have plenty of time. Besides, you have a big day in front of you and you need your nourishment. You like your eggs scrambled, right?”

“Y—yes,” Therese returned.

“White toast . . . no meat, so I sliced up a grapefruit . . . and my famous potato cakes. I threw those in for good measure.”

All the young scientist could do was stand there with her mouth open.

“Don’t let your coffee get cold,” she ordered. “My name is Nauja (Na-u). Means sea gull. I guess I reminded my mother of the screeching beasts when I wouldn’t stop bellowing after I was born. My son will have your jeep ready as soon as you’re finished. He’ll go over the map with you and let you know what to . . . stay away from. I even have a thermos of coffee for you. The morning air on the mountain can chill one to the bone.”

Tes sat as ordered and took a long gulp from the steaming cup. “Mmm, perfect. I—I can feel it go all the way down. I must say you got everything right. Only how—is the question?”

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"I have my secret weapon," Nauja replied as she set a hot plate of yellow fluffy eggs and golden brown toast before her guest. "Juice is coming right up."

Therese couldn't resist and dug right in. "This is wonderful. Thank you so much. I had no idea how hungry I was. When I landed, it was already too late to do anything except find your wonderful motel."

Nauja laughed. "Wonderful—no. Bare bones, yes, but thank you. My husband told me what time you came in. I hope your room was warm enough?" She placed the sizzling potato cakes and half-sliced golden grapefruit on the table, then warmed up her coffee. "I sprinkled your sugar already, so don't do it again or it'll be too sweet."

Therese smiled her thank you. A static burst took her attention, and she located the short-wave radio next to the office door. "I think I found your secret weapon . . . and it's clear I talk too much," she teased.

"My secret's safe with you, I think. Mike makes me look like a magic woman. He was a detective in his prior career, so he's good at getting all the goods on his passengers."

"I'll say. I didn't realize I had spilled my beans that completely. I guess you know why I'm here then?" She placed the last chunks of egg between two pieces of toast.

Nauja smiled. "I do the same thing. Actually, I assumed you were here to study the volcano. She has been rumbling lately. I am confused by something though. Mike said you were really interested in the valley to the southwest of the mountain?"

The young redhead paused, unsure of how to ask her about the isolated group of villagers. "Not just the valley. Can I ask you about the—"

"Doctor Marie, may I sit with you?"

"Of course," she replied, "But call me Tes. All my friends do."

"*Tes, that's pretty,*" Nauja softly said. "Is it short for something?"

"Yes—well kind of," she returned. "My name is Therese, but all my little brother could manage was Tes when he first started to talk, and I guess it sort of stuck."

Nauja's tone turned serious. "Tes, those people have stayed to themselves ever since my family can remember."

"How long is that?"

"More than ten generations. Some families go back three times

farther, and the same is true. Their village is known as Illa, but it has no post office declaration, no official status. They receive no government aid, and own all their lands outright. They only travel to this side of the island when someone wants to go to the mainland.”

“Yea, Mike told me,” Tes said. “Why are they so mysterious? He also said they’re some kind of a legend around here.”

Nauja’s eyes narrowed. “I’m telling you this so you don’t get yourself in the middle of something. Legend? I should say they’re a legend. This island has been evacuated numerous times in my lifetime, except they never leave. Each time we return, not one board or brick of their houses are singed, and most of their buildings are right below the summit. It’s like the mountain protects them. And one more thing. Although they’re all from the same tribe, it’s said that some of them look like they came from another part of the world. Attu for one. Dark brown hair, dark eyes . . . yet his grandfather’s features are typical Eskimo. They’re not Inuit or Aleut, much older tribe I think. Mysterious bunch!”

“Are they . . . I mean has any outsider ever been hurt . . . or disappeared?”

“No, never,” Nauja quickly assured. “They are a peaceful people. All I know is that other mainlanders have tried to get inside that group, but they seem to leave without any answers. In fact, the outsiders, as you say, refuse to talk about what happened to them. So after so many years of that happening, no one questions them anymore. And no one around here hardly ever talks about the villagers.”

“Please believe me, I’m here because I have to . . . to”

Nauja padded the youngsters hand. “Whatever you can’t tell me, I understand. You do what you came here to do. Just be careful. I trust you’ll tell us if there’s something we should know?”

“Certainly. Nothing to worry about for now.” Tes hoped her smile hid her concern. “Do you know one of them? Mike called him Maltoke or something.”

“His name is Maltuke. He and his grandson, Attu I think, come in here to use the shortwave to contact one of the bush pilots. Maltuke’s one of the Council Elders of their village.”

Tes turned serious. “I can tell you right now that I have to talk him, especially if he’s an official of their village.” An unmistakable distant shrill cut through the air and reminded her that she

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needed to leave.

Almost on cue the lobby door opened. A handsome Eskimo entered and walked toward the two females. “Dr. Marie, the jeep is gassed up and ready. I can close the all-weather cab-cover if you want.”

The young scientist felt somewhat overwhelmed. “No . . . actually. I have one too. And I love driving with it open. Besides, I’m from the northwest, the crisp air will wake me up.”

A charmed smile crossed his face. “There’s a mini-shortwave under the dash already tuned into this one. If you need anything, just call. Our handle is written on the unit.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” she said. “And please, call me, Tes.”

“I’m . . . Koko.” He blushed slightly. “Yea, like chocolate.” He pointed to his rich brown eyes. “My mom’s idea of a cruel joke.”

His mother smiled as she rose. She pulled him down to her height and planted a kiss on his rough cheek. “He loves it. Breaks the ice with all the girls.”

“Mom, not now.” He looked back at Tes. “Here’s a map of that side of the island. I pointed out most of the dwellings. Mike said you were looking for Maltuke. He lives . . . here.” He pointed to a small building near the island’s western shore. “Their valley’s marked within this boundary of trees. Here’s the main building, I’d start there. I think they call it their Sacred Gathering House.”

Dr. Marie studied the map intently. She pointed to a small dwelling along the road near a wide curve about a mile from the valley entrance. “This house. Who lives there?”

Both Eskimos looked at the map, then at each other. Nauja took a long breath. “That one has a strange story attached to it. We’re not exactly sure, but that belongs to Maltuke’s son and daughter-in-law.”

“Then Attu would be their son. Oh my . . . ?”

“Yes, I think so,” Koko answered. “It’s said that her husband disappeared over ten years ago.”

“Disappeared?” Tes questioned.

“Vanished. Gone,” Nauja volleyed.

“But the rumor is . . . he mysteriously returned. From where, no one’s actually sure,” Koko answered. “We only know this because Maltuke has a fondness for my mother’s potato cakes. And, as you know by now, she can get anyone to open up.”

Nauja smiled.

“I’ll remember that,” Tes teased.

“There’s only one road in and out, so that won’t be difficult. Here’s where the road breaks off if you want to get to the best mountain trails. If you have any other questions, just call me. I have a mini-unit in my truck too.”

“Again, thank you,” Tes offered. “Just add everything to my bill. By the way, do you guys take credit cards?”

“Yup,” Nauja said. “I just send the card numbers to the bank in a special secret code over the short-wave. Mike brings the mail and my banking every second Monday.”

Koko grinned, shook his head, and handed her the keys. “She thinks she so techno. Don’t let her know the truth.”

Tes smiled, picked up her backpack, grabbed the keys, and headed for the door. “I’ll be back before sunset. I’ll look forward to another one of your breakfasts.”



The Greatest Discovery of All Mankind . . .

“Ok . . . *where are you?*” Tes mumbled as she looked up in every direction for her bald eagle. “*Be careful, Tes dear, eyes on the road or you’ll find yourself at the bottom of one of these scary gorges.*” The sunrise was nearly one hour passed, and she was beginning to regret her breakfast delay, but forged ahead. “*Try to remember you wouldn’t be sitting in this nice jeep if you tried to get here on your own.*” The odometer revealed that she had traveled nearly thirty-five bumpy miles southwest. She kept glancing at her map knowing that the high ridge surrounding the valley must be getting closer.

A powerful shrill made her hit the brakes. She pulled off the road and stood outside the vehicle staring over a smaller ridge looking eastward. She cupped her hands to shield her line of sight from the clear sunrise, and spied her winged friend about a mile distant, circling high over what she hoped was the beginning of the valley. Tes jumped back in the jeep in a flash. She turned off-road toward her soaring tour guide and drove as far as she could until the terrain forced her to complete the distance on foot. After

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closing the cab-cover and her grabbing her backpack, she locked the vehicle, then began to hike at a fast pace.

Fourteen minutes later and clearly out of breath, the geophysicist sat down on a large boulder. She pulled out a cool drink, wiped her forehead on her sleeve, and kept switching her focus between her eagle-guide and the rugged terrain ahead. After a final long gulp she checked her compass, then looked up to find her wild friend had vacated the skies. Tes scanned every direction to no avail, then moved forward to the top of the ridge. She actually felt abandoned. *"Where are you, girl?"* she uttered, suddenly surprised she knew her friend was female. *"I guess I'm on my own,"* she softly added.

Then a prickly hush stilled everything.

The air became heavy with a static energy that even penetrated the boulder she sat on. She reached her hand out to block the bright sun rays breaking through the trees. An electric tingle coursed over her skin. Suddenly a familiar presence made her raise her head slightly, and she once again locked eyes with her bald eagle perched only meters away. The powerful bird turned her head to the right—directly toward the valley floor. So did she.

Dr. Marie's training went on auto-pilot.

Her camera was out in a flash. Chest to the ground, quickly assuming the standard prone position, Tes crawled to the edge of the ridge, offering her a covert view of the entire valley. After a quick unzip of her top pocket, she withdrew her unique quantum light meter designed to detect active photon particles beyond normal radiation, then pointed the unit's detection grid toward the sunlight horizon, and hit the record button. The indicators went off the scale, and she immediately disabled the light display.

A low grinding hum shook every surface.

In less than a few seconds, she thrust her spiked camera-mount into the ground, secured the camera in place, and pressed the auto-shutter designed to take a high resolution image every second for five minutes. She pressed record, held her breath, and looked up at her feathered companion.

The beautiful creature was watching her every move.

"Thank you," she breathed. Then every sensation magnified. In what seemed like her next breath, the valley was enveloped in a strange blue glow. In one extraordinary moment, a translucent stone formation winked in and out. A bright flash blinded her for

a moment. She blinked hard to clear her vision, and swore she saw a nucleus of lightning bolts dissolve in the valley's center.

Then everything returned: the wind, the overlapping voices of nature, and her heartbeat.

The valley looked completely normal.

Tes didn't dare move. She turned only enough to glance up at her female guide. The proud eagle turned her head back toward the valley, and so did Tes.

Three figures walked out of the far treeline to a point about twenty meters from where the lightning had just faded. Two men. One woman.

A smaller male suddenly appeared just beyond the same central location—stepping out of nowhere.

Tes's entire body trembled.

He hurried toward the female and hugged her tightly. Then the larger dark-haired male raised his hand to the smaller man's shoulder, and drew him in. The white-haired male joined them both. Tes placed both hands over her mouth as six more figures emerged through the same invisible wall. Her heart began thundering out of her chest. She immediately felt dizzy.

Even from her position, she could tell the figures were not Human.

The larger male approached the tallest of the six beings, extended his arm, and together they locked wrists. They obviously had done this before.

Tes rolled on her back trying to catch her breath. Her camera sounded a warning that the recording was about to end. She vainly tried to silence it, so she grabbed it off its mount and tucked it into her chest, not believing she didn't mute the device. "*Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God . . .*" she kept repeating—her voice barely audible. She strained to look back over her shoulder as one of the smaller beings pointed a device in her direction. She pressed herself even flatter behind the dense brush.

Then all the beings turned toward her. Tes was about to panic when the eagle thrust upward, spread her wings wide, and released a shrill that nearly pierced the geophysicist's ears. She shot straight toward the valley floor and swooped the new arrivals—completely stealing their focus. They followed her flight across the grassy plain, then turned and walked from the valley only to disappear through the same treeline.

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Tes sunk even lower. Staring up through the tall branches into the comfort of the deep blue sky, she couldn't hold back the tears. From relief. From the incredible emotion of the moment. From the realization that what just happened . . . actually happened. Her body began to shake uncontrollably. She wasn't prepared for this. Scattered thoughts raced through her. *What in God's name did I get myself into. This isn't covered in the field manual. My life is over. I'm going to give that bird a kiss.* That one made her laugh. Then cry. Then both. *My report is going to end up in Area 51.* She gripped her fingers together and prayed. *Please . . . tell . . . me what to do?*

A quiet calm brushed over her.

The images replayed in her mind and centered on one of the beings in the group; a slender figure with a long flowing braid. She quietly flipped herself back over and stared into the now empty valley. Her fear was fading, replaced by stubborn determination. Then she remembered the voice, *Le'car . . . please hear me.*

The soft tone, still clear, echoed again and again.

She pressed her burning eyes closed and concentrated on the image, glad for her photographic memory. Every being faded away, leaving only one in the center. Tes focused sharply and watched with awe as the alien female had turned to look in her direction—before the camera had signaled its alarm.

The extraordinary alien knew she was there.

Now she had no choice. She had to continue toward the village and get to that small dwelling near the wide curve in the road. For some reason she was certain that house was where she would find her answers.

